Language matters: Examining the language-related needs and wants of writers in a first-year university writing course

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Abstract: All writing involves complex linguistic knowledge and thoughtful decision-making. But where do students acquire the linguistic tools needed to write effectively? Many students come from diverse backgrounds and may need additional support and/or instruction in language and grammar. In order to better understand this situation, we conducted a qualitative multiple-case study to examine the experiences of 12 students in a first-year university-level composition course to understand the extent of their diverse learning backgrounds and language needs and expectations. We synthesized information from surveys, interviews, and written texts into narratives about each student's attitudes toward language and writing and also examined the actual language in their texts. The findings reveal wide diversity in linguistic backgrounds and experiences and that students need and want attention to their language skills in first-year writing. Findings further suggest that instructors should consider the backgrounds and abilities of individual student writers and listen carefully to students' perceptions about their own writing and language needs in order to build students' writing self-efficacy levels.

Keywords: Language, Grammar, First-year writing, Needs, Attitudes

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1. Introduction

To effectively accomplish their rhetorical and communicative aims across disciplines, genres, and professional contexts, student writers need an advanced and sophisticated repertoire of linguistic options. Having good ideas, a clear purpose, or a strong voice is valuable for clear and successful communication, but it is not always sufficient: Language also matters. Writing requires a great deal of explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge, and the options available to writers are extremely varied and complex. Further, when students feel that their knowledge of the linguistic options available to them as they write is incomplete, these knowledge gaps can undermine their confidence and self-efficacy levels (Sanders-Reio, Alexander, Reio, & Newman, 2014; Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1995).

Where do students acquire the linguistic knowledge needed to succeed in university writing tasks? Often scholars assume that students' own intuitions about language, particularly syntax, punctuation, and writing conventions, will suffice for successful academic writing (e.g., Hartwell, 1985). But do all students have similar levels of language ability when entering the university? Matsuda (2006) has critiqued what he called "the myth of linguistic homogeneity" in the U.S. context, explaining that even though second language speakers of English routinely enroll in writing courses, these courses are "designed primarily for U.S. citizens who are native speakers…of English" (p. 648). It is thus valuable to explore the nature of that linguistic diversity and thereby understand what level of linguistic support student writers need to succeed in a writing program, as well as what they want or expect to receive.

The study described in this article seeks to address these questions through a multiple case-study analysis of 12 first-year university writing students, who all successfully completed the same introductory writing course at the same time at a single institution. These focal students' language backgrounds are explored, as well as their actual and perceived language needs and their attitudes about language instruction and intervention. The results paint a picture of great diversity in both language backgrounds and language proficiency that influences levels of self-efficacy even among skilled and successful university students. The findings also raise practical implications for linguistically responsive first-year college/university writing instruction.

2. Background

2.1 Social-cognitive theory and writing self-efficacy

Researchers studying writing performance over the past decades have focused on students' self-efficacy. In articulating social-cognitive theory, Bandura (1977, 1986) claimed that human behavior derives from personal, behavioral, and environmental influences and that an individual's self-efficacy is correlated with behavioral change. Bandura defines self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (as cited in Pajares, 1996, p. 544). To put it another way, writing self-efficacy is the level to which students feel themselves capable of accomplishing a particular writing task.

Generally measured via surveys like the Writing Self-Efficacy Scale (Pajares, 2007), research shows that self-efficacy predicts writing performance (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985; Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1995) and is influenced by other factors like instruction, performance, and self-regulation of writing (Schunk & Schwartz, 1993; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Zimmerman & Kitsantas 1999, 2002). In other words, "self-efficacy beliefs and writing competency work in tandem, and improving one requires improving the other" (Pajares, 2007, p. 246). Students need to believe that they can accomplish a task to perform well, but they also need to succeed in order to believe that they can accomplish tasks well.

A number of learner variables have been correlated with writing self-efficacy, which in turn has been linked to writing performance (e.g., Bruning, Dempsey, Kauffman, McKim, & Zumbrunn, 2013; Bruning & Kauffman, 2015; Jones, 2008; Pajares, 2003). For instance, researchers have observed higher writing self-efficacy levels for more proficient compared to less proficient writers, for college sophomores compared to freshmen, and for first language (L1) compared to second language (L2)[1] students (Pajares & Johnson; 1996; Williams & Takaku, 2011; Zhang & Guo, 2012). The link between self-efficacy and writing performance is that the former tends to encourage help-seeking behavior and other positive strategies for successfully completing tasks (Williams & Takaku, 2011). Bazerman (2016) further noted the role of identity and social situation in sociocultural studies of writing. Considering students' learning backgrounds, motivations, and attitudes toward writing and language can inform instructional decisions that can build writing self-efficacy and improve students' writing performance. In this study, we use a social-cognitive theoretical lens and multiple-case study analysis to investigate what representative students in first-year university writing courses believe about their language development and their ability, both perceived and demonstrated, to deploy linguistic knowledge effectively in their writing.

2.2 Linguistic knowledge and effective writing

Scholars in writing studies and applied linguistics know that many varieties of English(es) co-exist and co-mingle with other languages/varieties around the world, that writers themselves may utilize knowledge of more than one of their languages while writing, and that conventions of language are themselves often arbitrary and always changing. Nonetheless, an individual writer's ability to make informed and effective linguistic choices while writing is indisputably necessary not only to the overall communicative success of a particular text but also to how the writer's competence may be perceived by others—and in turn, to the writer's emerging sense of self-efficacy.

Beyond ideas, arguments, and support, any act of writing requires constant decision-making on the part of the writer about a wide range of linguistic (and extralinguistic) features, including vocabulary, syntax, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing, as well as other elements of document design. Successful writing also requires a well-developed sense of how syntactic choices can communicate rhetorical effect (Kolln, 2007), of how different tasks and audiences can influence language choices (Johns, 1997; Tardy, 2009, 2016), and of how precise word choices can convey formality or informality and communicate meaning. In short, there is a great deal of both conscious and unconscious linguistic knowledge that goes into every sentence we write, and these choices can be extremely daunting to understand and to deploy.

2.3 Perspectives on grammar and error in composition studies and applied linguistics

Despite the inarguably critical role of linguistic knowledge for successful writing, writing studies scholars have, over the last half-century, argued against formal teaching of grammar as well as error correction in student writing. Studies going back as far as the 1930s have repeatedly concluded that decontextualized grammar instruction and comprehensive error correction do not improve the quality of student writing (for reviews, see Braddock, Lloyd-Jones & Schoer, 1963; Graham & Perin, 2007; Hillocks, 1984; Kolln & Hancock, 2005). Similarly, applied linguists focused on second language acquisition and writing have argued against a focus on formal grammar instruction and error correction (e.g., Krashen, 1984; Truscott, 1996; Zamel, 1985). Composition scholars have also claimed that error correction sends the wrong messages to students (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Sommers, 1982), causes teachers to overreact to minor, arbitrary issues (Williams, 1981), and especially discourages diverse students (Wall & Hull, 1981).

Hartwell (1985) notably argued along these lines that student writers have an internal sense of language and that the explicit, prescriptive teaching of grammar only confuses writers and wastes time: "most students, reading their writing aloud, will correct in essence all errors of spelling, grammar, and by intonation,

punctuation" (p. 454). More recent perspectives articulated by the translingual/translanguaging movement in writing studies (Canagarajah, 2018; Coronel-Molina & Samuelson, 2017; Lee & Jenks, 2016; Sohan, 2009), have focused particularly on the argument that in diverse, multicultural educational settings, we should be encouraging students to utilize all of their linguistic resources (including other languages they may speak), rather than prescriptively insisting upon some "correct," standard variety of written language. One (perhaps unintended) consequence of such anti-grammar/language beliefs in writing studies is that new composition instructors often receive little or no training in linguistics or in language-related writing pedagogy (MacDonald, 2007), leaving them ill-prepared to work with increasingly diverse student populations. At the same time, applied linguists and second language writing specialists have examined more promising (or enlightened) approaches to providing language support to L2 writers in particular, such as targeted, focused corrective feedback paired with mini-lessons or self-study on specific areas of need (see Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ferris, 2012; Ferris & Kurzer, 2019; Kurzer, 2018).

2.4 Language in writing and the stakes for student writers

Nonetheless, students of all backgrounds are still held accountable in many contexts for accurate, appropriate language use in writing. In most educational settings, writing assessment rubrics almost universally assign value to some language component. For example, the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement for first-year college/university writing makes it clear that students need to "develop knowledge of…grammar, punctuation, and spelling" (Council, 2014). Scholars further note that some language errors in writing are *global* (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972), meaning that they interfere with readers' comprehension of the message and may be stigmatizing (Hendrickson, 1980), sending "messages which writers can't afford to send" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 12) to real-world audiences who, fairly or unfairly, will judge the writer's competence accordingly. The influence of written error on external audiences has further been studied in lines of "error gravity" research, which examines readers' reactions to error—by students or prospective employers—in various settings, including across university disciplines and in the workplace (Beason, 2001; Hairston, 1981; Janopolous, 1992; Santos, 1988; Vann, Meyer, & Lorenz, 1984). Though the findings of such studies have been mixed, with some audiences reacting more negatively to written errors than others, it is clear that in many contexts, students' ability to produce clear and linguistically accurate texts still matters a great deal.

2.5 Demographic change and its implications

Demographics in writing classes, in the U.S. and elsewhere, have shifted in the decades since Hartwell's 1985 article. Now more than ever, writers with diverse

language repertoires and experiences are enrolled in university writing classes. In the U.S., for example, nearly one million international students were enrolled in higher education in 2017-18 (Institute of International Education, 2019). Further, millions of immigrant and first-generation English speakers, the so-called Generation 1.5 population (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Roberge, Siegal, & Harklau, 2009), enroll yearly in colleges and universities. Studies by Doolan (2010, 2013, 2017; Doolan & Miller, 2012) and Ferris (2006; Eckstein & Ferris, 2018) have demonstrated that Generation 1.5 students exhibit linguistic characteristics distinct from those of both L1 and L2 English writers.

The fact that writing courses likely include learners from diverse origins underscores the need for teachers to be aware of their students' backgrounds (Ferris, Eckstein, & DeHond, 2017; Matsuda, Saenkhum, & Accardi, 2013). Nation and Macalister (2007), both applied linguists, argued that teachers should specifically determine students' *needs* and *wants* in designing language-focused instruction. They associate *needs* with course learning outcomes such as demonstrating mastery of certain field-specific vocabulary or other language structures. They describe *wants* as learner preferences: skills that students are concerned about. Applying this framework to writing instruction, we recognize the relevance of understanding stated language-related outcomes (their *needs*) in relation to students' incoming knowledge base(s) as a way to prepare meaningful instruction. Further, considering students' attitudes toward and preference for language instruction (their *wants*) is also important when planning course materials and a useful step towards building their writing self-efficacy.

2.6 Studies of error in student writing

The term "error" (in writing or in language use in general) has been controversial both in composition studies and in applied linguistics. Linguists, for example, have distinguished between "competence" (or linguistic knowledge), the lack of which leads to "errors," and "performance" (what a learner says/writes in real time) which sometimes leads to "mistakes" (resulting from a lack of time and/or focused attention) in language production (Chomsky, 1965; Corder, 1967). However, as psycholinguists began to investigate connections between child (L1) acquisition and L2 acquisition, some linguists argued that "errors" were in fact "interlanguage" and a normal and expected developmental stage in language acquisition, not something that required attention or intervention (Krashen, 1982; Selinker, 1973). In composition studies, researchers such as Bartholomae (1980) and Shaughnessy (1977) argued that applied linguistic principles of error analysis (from Corder and others) should be used to examine student texts and develop pedagogical strategies for helping diverse students increase linguistic control in their writing.

Beyond these theoretical arguments, composition and applied linguistics researchers have examined actual student writing to characterize common error

patterns. Studies of college student writing in the U.S. by Connors and Lunsford (1988) and a replication by Lunsford and Lunsford (2008) utilized error analysis techniques to identify the "top-20" most common errors. While the two studies together indicated that students' observed language errors had changed over time (i.e., the top-20 lists changed between 1988 and 2008), they also highlighted the reality that many entering university student writers still need support with language issues—that they make both errors and mistakes.

Other studies have focused on the error patterns of L2 writers, either in isolation or in contrast with other groups of student writers. Ferris (2006) examined a large corpus of L2 university student writing, categorizing over 5,000 written errors, and finding that L2 writers' errors differed in type and frequency from those identified by the Connors/Lunsford/Lunsford studies. Doolan (2017) contrasted errors in a corpus of U.S. college student writing by writers identified as L1, as "early arrival" Generation 1.5, or as L2 (late-arrival resident students or international students), reporting that L2 writers' errors were distinct from those of both L1 and Generation 1.5 writers. Similarly, Eckstein and Ferris (2018) studied first-week writing samples of 120 students in a first-year university writing course. Both L1 and L2 writers in the sample struggled in similar ways with pronoun usage, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and mechanics. However, similar to Doolan's (2017) findings, L2 writers made significantly more language errors involving verbs, nouns, sentence structure, word choice, and word form issues.

In addition to categorizing students' language errors, via survey data, Eckstein and Ferris (2018) found that L2 writers lacked confidence in their writing abilities and language control compared with their L1 peers: Forty-three percent of L1 writers reported feeling very confident in their knowledge of English grammar compared to only 18% of L2 writers. Ferris et al. (2017), who conducted surveys and interviews with the same population, found that both L1 and L2 writers wanted more in-class attention to language development and that students "overwhelmingly wanted and expected language instruction" (p. 418). In sum, first-year university students demonstrated "needs" in their written language facility and expressed "wants" for language instruction and intervention. The researchers argued that student backgrounds and attitudes toward writing, grammar instruction, and language feedback need to be considered when developing these interventions.

Such backgrounds and attitudes are significant because, even though students typically believe error feedback is valuable (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013; Truscott, 1996), there may be individual differences that affect students' cognitive ability and motivation to write (Kormos, 2012) and their subsequent ability to utilize error correction or grammar instruction to improve their writing (Ferris et al. 2013; Igo, Toland, Floowerday, Song, & Kiewra, 2002; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). As already noted, one construct that captures the interplay between writing motivation

and individual differences is self-efficacy, which can be defined as a person's beliefs about their capabilities (Pajares, 2003). Writing self-efficacy is a specific measure of an individual's self-confidence across "various composition, grammar, usage, and mechanical skills" (Pajares & Valiante, 2001, p. 369).

Thus, our purpose in the present study is to investigate individual student backgrounds, language usage, and attitudes as a way to understand students' needs and desires for language instruction. To triangulate the findings of previous research in which writers demonstrated language needs and expressed desires for language instruction, we sought students' perspectives on these issues in their own voices (both orally in interviews and through their reflective writing). We chose a multiple-case study approach because most previous research on writing self-efficacy has been psychometric and quantitative and because error analysis studies have generally been on a larger scale and focused only on student text samples rather than examining other contextual or individual information. The multiple-case study design allowed us to probe more deeply into individual students' backgrounds, experiences, attitudes, and feelings than would be feasible in a psychometric or primarily quantitative design. These research questions guided our analysis:

1. How did our 12 focal students differ from one another with regard to their language backgrounds, especially as to prior grammar/language and writing instruction?
2. To what extent did our participants express confidence about their ability to employ linguistic knowledge effectively in their writing, and did they expect language support in an FYC program?
3. What did participants' writing reveal about their language abilities?
4. How closely did participants' observed language abilities correspond with their own beliefs about their writing and language use?

3. The Study

3.1 Context and Course

Student participants were recruited from 12 sections of a first-year writing course at a large, competitive U.S. public research university. This course fulfilled the lower-division writing requirement for graduation. The instructors of the 12 sections, all second-year PhD students, were teaching the course for the first time from a common syllabus designed by Ferris (program director at the time) that emphasized rhetorical awareness and genre flexibility, but offered little formal language instruction beyond peer-editing workshops on paper drafts. The course took place over a ten-week fall (September-December) quarter, with classes meeting twice per week for 110 minutes per meeting. Major assignments included an in-class midterm

(an argumentative task based on assigned sources read and discussed in advance) that was then revised for a grade, and a final portfolio consisting of three papers:

1. The final version (students' choice) of an early, shorter assignment that was either a literacy narrative (Assignment 1) or a problem paper written to a chosen audience (Assignment 2);
2. A substantive research paper (Assignment 3) that contrasted the features of academic and popular texts on a scientific topic;
3. A portfolio letter drafted in class the final week of the term (the "Week 10 writing sample") and revised by the student for final submission.

The final grades were based 50% on the portfolios, which were compiled electronically and graded during finals week by 2-3 other writing instructors, and 50% on the midterm, homework, in-class work, and completion of a language self-study project (see Ferris et al., 2017, for a complete description of this language self-study project).

3.2 Participants

This multiple-case study was part of a larger study that examined students' usage of and responses to a language self-study project (either online grammar study or self-selected vocabulary study). In addition to collecting and analyzing data from nearly 300 students regarding the self-study projects, the study design included identifying a smaller number of focal (case study) students to interview and study more closely. Participants in the study gave consent for their writing to be collected and completed a first-week survey of backgrounds and attitudes towards grammar and language instruction in the context of writing classes, described further under data collection, below. The last question of the survey elicited volunteers for the multiple-case study portion of the research. 120 students volunteered via this survey question, and respondents were classified as L2 students if they indicated on their survey that English was not the primary or only language in their home (see Appendix A, Question 4).

From the volunteer list, we selected 12 students[2] using these criteria: (1) whether they were L2 or L1 English speakers; and (2) whether they had expressed some ambivalence or insecurity on their Week 1 surveys about their command of language use when writing in English, specifically regarding grammar or vocabulary. Since the goal of this part of the study was to examine students' wants and needs as to language instruction in academic writing contexts, we wanted our case-study participants to have expressed some felt need for improvement in this area.

Within these parameters, we also sought variety across first language backgrounds and educational experiences (e.g., new to the U.S., international students, long-term immigrants, or born in the U.S., whether they graduated from a U.S. high school). Our 12 focal students served as a representative sample of the

larger group of nearly 300 students (see Ferris et al., 2017, for a detailed description of whole-group characteristics).

Table 1 provides an overview of the 12 focal students' characteristics with their self-selected pseudonyms, with the English L1 students listed first and then the L1 and L2 subgroups ordered by their year in school. The majority were in heavily STEM-focused majors, 25% were freshmen,[3] and half of the L2 students had been required to take at least two remedial writing courses (an ESL writing course and a general basic writing course) at the university before enrolling in the first-year composition course, patterns consistent with the overall population in this writing program (see Ferris et al., 2017). Only one of the four English native speakers, Sunny, had taken the basic writing course.

3.3 Data Collected

The data collected for each focal student included their Week 1 survey responses, their written work for the course, and notes and recordings taken during their two interviews. These data sources are described in more detail in this subsection.

Table 1: Summary of Focal Student Characteristics

Name	Home L1	Year in school	Major/College	Remedial Course(s)
Rebecca	English	Freshman	Agricultural & Environmental Sciences	No
Sabrina	English	Freshman	Biological Sciences	No
John	English	Sophomore	Agricultural & Environmental Sciences	No
Sunny	English	Junior	Biological Sciences	Yes
Erica	Chinese	Freshman	Social Science	No
Carmen	Spanish	Sophomore	Agricultural & Environmental Sciences	Yes
Ed	Korean	Sophomore	Biological Sciences	No
Factor	Chinese	Sophomore	Biological Sciences	Yes
Gloria	Spanish	Sophomore	Undeclared	Yes
Janessa	Hmong	Sophomore	Agricultural & Environmental Sciences	Yes
Sassy	Chinese	Sophomore	Engineering	Yes
Anita	Chinese	Senior	Social Science	No

Week 1 survey. The Week 1 survey was distributed and completed electronically, using the SurveyMonkey® collector. The survey had 20 questions, including demographic questions, questions about students' previous experience in taking college-level writing courses, and questions asking them to self-assess their own grammar and self-editing knowledge. As already noted, the final question allowed them to add their name and contact information if they wanted to volunteer to be interviewed for the research project; otherwise, responses were anonymous. The text of the survey is shown in Appendix A.

Writing samples. The assignment prompts for all texts collected are shown in Appendix B.

*Week 1 writing***.** All students in the 12 sections completed two in-class writing tasks that were collected as part of the study design. The Week 1 writing sample was written on students' own laptops during a 50-minute block of the second class period, and it asked students to reflect upon a piece of writing they had done within the previous year, talk about the experience of writing it and what it showed about who they were as writers, and articulate goals or hopes for the first-year writing course they were about to take. Students completed homework between Days 1-2 to help prepare them for this writing task, and they were given the writing prompt in class. This in-class writing was also used as a prewriting activity for their first substantial paper, a literacy narrative.

*Week 10 writing***.** On the last day of instruction, students again completed a 50-minute in-class writing task, this time a draft of the portfolio letter they would submit the following week with their final portfolios. Again, they were given homework to prepare them for the task and specific instructions as to how to complete it. Students then were allowed to finalize and polish the in-class drafts before submitting the letters with their final portfolios. For both in-class writing tasks, when finished writing, students were asked to upload their texts to the course website. Instructors then delivered class sets of the in-class writings to the research team.

Midterm (in-class and revision). For the 12 focal students, we also collected other writing they did as part of the course requirements. All students wrote an in-class midterm essay during Week 5 of the course, again written in class on student laptops and uploaded to the course website. Students were then led through an in-class debrief of the midterm during the next class period and asked to make any revisions of their midterms that they felt necessary. Both the in-class and revised midterms were collected and graded as part of their coursework; we collected both versions as well for analysis.

Final portfolios. All students submitted electronic portfolios that included the final version of the portfolio letter (after drafting it in class as the Week 10 writing sample), and final versions of two multiple-draft assignments they had completed during the quarter: their choice of either Assignment 1 or Assignment 2, and Assignment 3, as described above. We collected the focal students' portfolios from their instructors.

In sum, we collected and analyzed up to seven pieces of writing for each focal student: the two in-class writing samples, the in-class and revised midterms, and the three final versions of the portfolio assignments (letter plus two papers). However, we were unable to collect full sets of texts from several students. Ultimately, 71 different texts from the 12 students were collected: two each from Ed and Anita, five from Gloria, six from Sabrina, and seven each from the other eight focal students. Table 2 summarizes the texts collected from the 12 students and includes word counts.

Table 2: Summary of Texts Collected from the 12 Focal Students (with # of words in each text)

Student	Written in class			Drafted in class, revised out of class		Written out of class		Total Texts	Total Words
	Week 1 Sample	Midterm	Week 10 Sample	Revised Midterm	Revised Portfolio Letter	Portfolio Assignment 1 or 2	Portfolio Assign-ment 3		
Anita	542		517					2	1059
Ed	554		500					2	1054
Gloria	741		492		928	1025	1536	5	4722
Sabrina	579		723	862	806	996	1235	6	5201
Factor	870	1192	756	1194	802	1195	1227	7	7236
Janessa	502	783	679	875	633	933	1282	7	5687
John	683	1141	772	1135	770	1272	1280	7	7053
Sassy	595	654	566	1332	549	986	1359	7	6041
Sunny	676	923	755	1051	757	1483	1335	7	6980
Erica	990	942	682	1179	801	1131	1478	7	7203
Carmen	788	1075	891	848	788	1462	2093	7	7945
Rebecca	496	846	664	938	791	1142	1365	7	6242

Portfolio grades. As a separate measure of overall student achievement during the course, we also collected the grades assigned to the 12 focal students' final portfolios. These portfolios, as already described, were scored by 2-3 first-year composition instructors who used a standard portfolio rubric, with possible grades being "Meritorious" (M), "Satisfactory" (S), or "Unsatisfactory" (U), with plus or minus grades also an option (e.g., "M-" or "S+").

Focal student interviews. Each focal student participated in two interviews, one during Weeks 3-4 of the term and the other during Week 10, the last week of the quarter before final exams (see Appendix C for interview protocols). The semi-structured interviews, conducted by the researchers, lasted 15-20 minutes. Both interviewer notes and audio-recordings were uploaded to a project website for research team analysis. Participants received a modest gift card as thanks for their time after completing the second interview.

3.4 Data Analysis

Holistic ratings of language use. As part of the larger study, all of the Week 1 and Week 10 in-class writing samples were scored by the research team according to a six-point holistic rubric created for the study focused on "language use" (see Appendix D) that considered language errors (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) and other language-related features, such as facility in lexical choice and sentence variety, reasoning that formal language error alone (or the lack thereof) inadequately defines sophisticated and rhetorically effective writing (see also Doolan, 2017). As described in Ferris et al. (2017), two members of the research team independently scored each text, with a third reader resolving discrepancies as needed (this happened in about 10% of the sample). Calculated inter-rater reliability Kappa scores were just over .90. Within the larger sample of first-year composition students, L2 students as a group received lower holistic scores on their in-class writing samples than did their L1 peers (Ferris et al., 2017, Table 2, p. 429).

Error codes. We also analyzed the focal students' language errors in all of their texts in nine major categories: word choice, mechanics, nouns/noun phrases, pronouns, punctuation, sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, and verbs/verb phrases. These categories had been identified and operationalized in an earlier phase of the study with a larger sample of texts (Eckstein & Ferris, 2018) and are also quite similar to the list examined in Doolan's (2017) corpus study of L1, Generation 1.5, and L2 student writing. "Mechanics" was operationalized as spelling errors, typing, capitalization, and compound-word errors, while punctuation errors included missing/unnecessary commas, semicolons, apostrophes, and quotation marks. After coding for errors, we calculated an error ratio for each text (number of coded errors to number of total words) and average error ratios for the entire sample of texts for each student (because, as noted above and in Table 2, we did not have a complete set of texts for four of the 12 students). As described in Eckstein & Ferris (2018), the researchers separately coded errors for a subsample of 20 student texts. Having obtained inter-rater agreement on that sample of 95% (Kappa 0.95), the researchers then divided and coded the rest of the sample. (See also Doolan, 2017, for a description of an error coding procedure very similar to ours.)

Focal student narratives. Using narrative inquiry methods (Connolly and Clandinin, 1990; Schwandt, 2007), each focal student's primary data—text samples and resulting scores or analyses, survey, and interview notes and recordings—were examined by the researchers and then compiled into case-study narratives to be utilized as a secondary data source. This allowed us to synthesize the disparate data sources and analyses, facilitate cross-case comparisons, and examine themes across the whole sample of 12 students (Creswell, 2018; Ferris et al., 2013). Though narrative inquiry takes a variety of forms in qualitative research, its common characteristics include focusing on individual experiences, using a time or chronological structure, and collecting stories told to the researcher and/or through participants' texts (e.g., journals, or, in our study, reflective writing and survey responses). Researchers gather the stories and rewrite them into a logical sequence.

To compose the narratives for this study, the two researchers reviewed all of the primary material for each participant (interview notes and recordings, survey responses, written texts) and drafted the narratives under the subheadings listed below. Each reviewer drafted six narratives. As a reliability and accuracy check, the other researcher then reviewed both the primary material and the narrative draft for the other six participants, noting any disagreements or factual errors, which were then resolved by discussion before the 12 narratives were finalized.[4] Each of this study's narratives were approximately 1500 words long, structured by the subheadings Background, Self-Reported Writing/Editing Processes, Language Control (conceptualized as grammar and language usage as observed in the collection of texts), Change (over the term in a first-year writing course), and Summary/Analysis. The authors then read through the twelve narratives together in a meeting, identifying four specific themes observed across the 12 individual narratives and describe them below.

Results and Discussion

From the data analyses described in the previous section, we identified and investigated four themes in students' narratives: (1) students' writing and language backgrounds and how those backgrounds may have influenced current attitudes and language proficiency; (2) the language control observed in their texts and how it varied across writing contexts; (3) their attitudes toward writing as they began and finished the writing course; and (4) the students' own perceptions of their language use in their writing.

Variation across Students' Backgrounds

Language backgrounds and instruction. Our first research question examined students' language backgrounds and prior grammar/language instruction. Given the growing linguistic diversity found among students at U.S. institutions of higher education, we anticipated seeing similar patterns of diversity across our 12 focal students. Indeed, as described previously, we chose our focal students to represent the characteristics of the larger sample in our study (nearly 300 students in 12 sections of first-year composition; see Ferris et al., 2017 for more details). Results of our investigation confirmed that students indeed came from highly diverse backgrounds as to their linguistic experiences. Moreover, their linguistic backgrounds were far more complex than simple "L1 vs. L2" labels can capture. Among the eight English L2 students, Anita was an international/visa student; Janessa, Carmen, and Gloria were born in the U.S. and raised in bilingual homes; and Factor, Sassy, Erica, and Ed were resident immigrants who had arrived in the U.S. after age 9. Even our four English L1 participants had diverse early language experiences: Sunny, born in the U.S., was raised partially abroad and attended a French-language primary school in Belgium. Sabrina, born and raised in Hawaii as a monolingual English speaker, was exposed daily to the indigenous Hawaiian language. These backgrounds are meaningful since language exposure can influence language use, with L2 writers being more likely to produce linguistic errors (Doolan, 2017; Eckstein & Ferris, 2018), but immigrant and bilingual statuses can also affect language use and development (Doolan, 2017; Roberge et al, 2009).

Educational pathways. The L2 students described varied educational pathways and English grammar instruction as young learners. Gloria, born and raised in the U.S. in a bilingual Spanish-English home, was not identified for ESL/bilingual instruction until middle school when a standardized test placed her into "the ESL department," where she completed "fill-in-the-blank worksheets" (Gloria, Interview 1) instead of more challenging writing instruction; Carmen, from a similar background, was in a bilingual Spanish-English program until the sixth grade and then mainstreamed into regular English language arts instruction. Anita, the visa student from China, and the other later-arriving L2 immigrant students, all recalled having taken English language classes in their home countries. All received specialized bilingual/ESL instruction or support after their arrival in the U.S., but the nature of this support varied greatly. Erica attended an English immersion school for one year after her arrival, Factor was "forced" by his parents to take an after-school English grammar class in middle school, and Ed was assigned a tutor/translator to help him in fifth grade, his first year in the U.S. This range from voluntary to "forced" enrollment in language-specific courses reflects students' complex language identities and shifting self-perceptions as language learners as seen in earlier studies of first-year

composition (Braine, 1996; Costino & Hyon, 2007; Ferris et al., 2013; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008).

In the survey and interviews, all 12 focal students described receiving some English grammar instruction during their primary and secondary years of schooling, though its forms varied—from "sentence-diagramming" (John) to "sentence-combining" (Sunny) to "packets of worksheets" (Rebecca) to intensive pull-out or after-school English grammar instruction (Sassy, Janessa, and Factor). They also had a range of opinions about the effectiveness of this instruction and its ongoing effects on their writing. In short, these 12 students, all taking the same course at the same university at the same time, had widely different backgrounds as to previous formal English instruction and amounts and types of informal English language exposure.

Attitudes toward grammar use and writing. Because students' general dispositions toward writing affect their self-efficacy and ability or willingness to improve (Pajares, 2003), we also examined students' own attitudes toward writing as they began the course. The Week 1 in-class writing prompt elicited memories of previous writing and a self-evaluation of current abilities at the beginning of the term. Based on research by Jones (2008) showing that writing self-efficacy measures increase over a semester of first-year writing, we were not surprised to encounter negative attitudes towards writing among our focal student participants. Eight of the 12 students expressed strongly negative feelings about themselves as writers and/or their previous English language instruction in their first interviews and in their first-week writing samples. They described being bored with overly structured/rigid assignments, being discouraged by peer and/or teacher feedback, and "learning nothing" because they were in too-easy classes or they believed their teachers were incompetent. They also had a number of self-criticisms such as insecurity about their grammar and/or vocabulary control. Some critiqued their own writing processes, describing themselves as lazy, unwilling to conform to teachers' requirements, or reluctant to take constructive feedback from others. Of the 12, only Ed expressed positive feelings towards his previous writing experiences, saying that he had "challenged" himself with harder high school classes and felt that his effort and dedication had resulted in improved writing.

Students' Language Confidence and Expectations for Language Support

Our second research question investigated students' language confidence and their expectations for language support. Since our earlier study (Ferris et al., 2017) demonstrated that nearly 60% of 239 first-year writing students felt only somewhat confident about their grammar knowledge and about 25% felt weak, we expected rather low levels of language confidence. We asked about this through the Week 1 survey (See Appendix A, Question 15), where students responded to 12 specific

language areas using a scale from 1-3 (1=Frequently struggle with, 2=Sometimes struggle with, 3=Never struggle with). Table 3 presents the average score across our 12 focal students for each language area. On average, students felt least confident controlling awkward/wordy sentences, followed by commas and other punctuation concerns and felt most confident in their use of apostrophes, pronoun reference, and plural endings on nouns. We might predict that items higher on the list would more likely reflect students' expectations and preferences for language support.

Table 3: Average Confidence in Language Usage for 12 Focal Students (1=least confident; 3=most confident)

Language Feature (ranked least to most confident)	Average Confidence Level across 12 Focal Students
Awkward/wordy sentences	1.63
Commas	1.72
Other punctuation	1.72
Sentence boundaries	1.80
Word choice	1.81
Subject-verb agreement	1.81
Citations	1.90
Verb tense/form	1.91
Articles before nouns	2.20
Apostrophes	2.25
Pronoun reference	2.25
Plural endings on nouns	2.45

We also calculated individual students' average grammar confidence across those twelve language-related areas and found a wide variety in student self-perceptions, as shown in Table 4. Two students, Factor and Sassy, indicated that they frequently struggled with every single language area.

As noted previously, all of our students had already experienced language instruction in their previous schooling, so we wanted to know whether our focal students wanted, expected, or preferred it in a first-year university writing course. Most of the students (eight of 12) indicated on the Week 1 survey that they expected a first-year writing course to include formal grammar instruction; three (Carmen, Sunny, and John) selected "Not sure/no opinion." Only one, Factor, said "No," appearing to associate grammar instruction with remedial courses, of which he'd already completed three (Factor, Week 1 writing sample and Interview 1)—despite having self-reported very low levels of language confidence (Table 4). Janessa and Ed, on the other hand, were highly confident in their language ability but nevertheless expected grammar instruction in the course. Thus, even though there

was variation in how confident these focal students were in language use across different linguistic features, they almost all expected grammar instruction in first-year composition, a finding consistent with previous research (e.g., Ferris et al., 2017; Zhou, Busch, & Cumming, 2013).

Table 4: Average Confidence Level Reported by Individual Students for 12 Language Areas (1=least confident; 3=most confident)

Student Name (rank-ordered from least to most confident)	Average Confidence Level on 12 Specific Language Features
Factor	1.00
Sassy	1.00
John	1.75
Sabrina	1.83
Anita	1.83
Erica	2.10
Gloria	2.16
Rebecca	2.18
Carmen	2.41
Sunny	2.50
Janessa	2.50
Ed	2.66

Students' Actual Language Abilities

Our third research question focused on students' actual language abilities in terms of their written accuracy and areas of most difficulty. Previous research has shown that first-year writers of all descriptions struggle with language errors (Connors & Lunsford, 1988; Doolan, 2017; Ferris, 2006; Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008), including those associated with commas, pronouns, word choice, subject/verb agreement, prepositions, apostrophes, and number- and tense-shifts. Further, studies have indicated differences in the kinds and number of errors made by L1 and L2 learners (Doolan, 2010, 2013, 2017; Eckstein & Ferris, 2018). Thus, we expected to find variation in students' language abilities reflective of their status as first-year college writers and their L1 or L2 backgrounds. We examined student texts through marking and coding errors, evaluating overall language use with holistic scores, calculating error ratios, and examining contextual factors (e.g., whether the text was written in or out-of-class) and course outcomes (final portfolio scores). Table 5 provides a summary of this analysis.

Table 5: Results of Text Analyses

Student Name	Week 1 Text Holistic Score*	Week 10 Text Holistic Score*	Total words	Total Errors	Error Ratio**	Most Frequent Error Types	Final Portfolio Scores***
English L1 Students							
John	5	6	7053	201	1:35	Punctuation	S-
Sabrina	6	7	5201	146	1:36	Punctuation	S+
Rebecca	6	6	6242	126	1:50	Punctuation	S/S+
Sunny	6	7	6980	110	1:64	Punctuation, Sentence Structure	M-
English L2 Students							
Anita	4	4	1059	75	1:14	Nouns, Sentence Structure, Verbs	S-
Sassy	3	4	6041	282	1:21	Word choice, nouns, sentence structure	S
Janessa	5	4	5687	201	1:23	Sentence Structure	S-
Gloria	4	6	4722	190	1:25	Punctuation, nouns, sentence structure	S-
Factor	2	6	7236	282	1:26	Sentence structure, word choice, nouns, word form	S
Ed	6	5	1054	38	1:28	Nouns, Sentence Structure	S
Carmen	7	7	7945	236	1:34	Word choice, punctuation, sentence structure	S
Erica	8	8	7203	113	1:64	Punctuation	S/S+

*2-12 score possible

**(errors marked per words, i.e., 1:34 means one error per every 34 words in the sample)

***Portfolios were scored by 2-3 instructors at the end of the term using "Meritorious" (M), "Satisfactory" (S), or "Unsatisfactory" (U) with plus or minus half-steps.

Generally speaking, and as expected, the English L1 students received higher scores than did the English L2 students across holistic assessments of language and writing (the Week 1 and Week 10 text scores and the portfolio scores) and had lower error ratios. There were outliers in both groups: John had the highest error ratio and

lowest holistic scores on his in-class texts, and lowest portfolio score among the L1 students, while Erica had the highest or near-highest scores on every measure across both L1 and L2 student groups. In addition, errors made by the L1 writers were less frequent and less serious with "punctuation" (which often meant simply a misplaced quotation mark) marked as their most frequent error. The only exception was Sunny, who also had relatively frequent errors with sentence boundaries (run-ons and comma splices)—but who nonetheless was arguably the strongest writer overall in the sample of 12, having received the highest portfolio score and being tied with Erica for the lowest overall error ratio. We return to the case of Sunny below and in the conclusion.

With the exception of Erica, all of the L2 students had higher error ratios than all of the L1 students, and their errors tended to be more serious and typical of L2 learners, such as noun plurals, word choice, and sentence structure. Three of the eight L2 students barely passed their portfolios with "S-" scores, and several received low holistic scores ranging from 2-4 for the in-class writing samples. However, five of eight passed their portfolios with scores of "S" or higher, suggesting that the more frequent language errors by these L2 students did not greatly affect their ultimate course outcomes.

3.5 Language control and student backgrounds

Our study design did not allow us to make direct causal connections between what we saw in students' texts and what we learned earlier about their backgrounds. However, we can make some informed guesses or predictions. First, we would predict that because of their divergent backgrounds—as to first language, as to years of learning English, as to the structure of their educational (and especially language-learning) experiences prior to coming to the university—the L2 students would demonstrate linguistic strengths and knowledge gaps that are different not only from their L1 peers in the study but also from one another. Indeed, this was the case. As we can see from Table 2 and Table 5, the 12 students had tremendous variation in the amount of text (number of words) they produced under different writing conditions and in the amount and types of language errors they made. To highlight just one contrast, Rebecca (an L1 writer) and Janessa (an L2 writer) produced the fewest words on the first in-class writing task, and both added nearly 100 words to their in-class midterms when allowed to revise them out of class (Table 2). These data suggest that both were slow, careful writers who needed time and space to produce more text. However, in Table 5, we can see that overall, Rebecca was a more successful writer, with fewer, less serious errors, higher holistic scores for language ability on her in-class writing, and a higher final portfolio score, while Janessa was one of the weakest overall writers among the twelve, receiving a barely passing final portfolio score and the lowest Week 10 in-class writing holistic score. In Rebecca's case, less fluent in-class writing did not mean that her language

abilities were a problem for her overall success in the class. In Janessa's, though, her more frequent, more serious errors may well have factored into her weaker outcome at the end.

The L2 students' lower confidence levels may also have been influenced by their educational and linguistic backgrounds. In particular, several of the L2 participants spoke in their initial interviews and/or in the first in-class writing about how shocked and discouraged they had been to be placed in remedial writing coursework upon entering the university; some also spoke with some bitterness about feeling underprepared for college-level writing because of what they perceived as inadequate instruction in secondary school. For example, Carmen, in her first interview, said this:

> Once I got to high school, all that was done—I don't think I ever touched grammar. It was more like you either know it or you don't. And now that I'm here, I'm supposed to know about grammar and syntax and vocabulary and diction and all those things—I'm supposed to know them, but when I came here, everything was so new. Even though I was in AP classes in high school, and I thought I knew everything, but actually, I don't. It's a lot harder and I have to know much more. (Carmen, Interview 1; Ferris et al., 2017, p. 427)

While the L1 students in our study were overall more successful than were their L2 peers at deploying their linguistic knowledge in their writing for the courses (see Table 5), their previous writing experiences may have also affected both their writing strategies and their attitudes. Sunny, for example, was the only L1 student of the four who had been required to take a remedial writing course; five of the eight L2 students had been required to do so. In her first in-class writing and in her first interview, Sunny expressed strong disdain for writing ("I hate writing with a passion," Sunny, In-Class Writing Week 1). However, in her final writing (her portfolio letter), she wrote happily about how she had been able to use her own preferred writing style for the second portfolio assignment and had thus stayed true to her own ideas and her own voice. It seemed clear that Sunny had felt discouraged by previous negative feedback about her writing, which she perceived as controlling, and that greater freedom in first-year composition had built her confidence and improved her motivation for writing.

3.6 Contextual differences in demonstrated language control

Despite our expectations for student variance in language ability, we found that the numbers in Table 5 do not tell the whole story. Several of our L2 focal students performed dramatically better in terms of grammar usage when given the chance to revise their work following timed in-class writing, a finding that comports with prior research (Kenworthy, 2006; Kroll, 1990). We looked at students' error patterns in timed in-class settings (the Week 1 writing sample, the Week 10 writing sample,

and the midterm), in timed writings revised out-of-class (the midterm and the Week 10 writing sample, which was an in-class draft of the portfolio letter), and in papers composed and revised entirely out-of-class over a period of weeks with peer and teacher feedback (Assignment 1 or 2 and Assignment 3, described above). The differences across contexts were striking for some of our focal students but not others (Table 5). Several examples of these contrasts are highlighted in Table 6. The numbers in the cells are the students' calculated error ratios for individual texts and for the total sample of their texts.

As Table 6 illustrates, Factor's and Sassy's observed language control varied tremendously depending on whether they were writing in-class or out-of-class and whether they had the opportunity to revise in-class work for a final grade. Both had extremely high error ratios on all three in-class texts but made substantial improvements in their out-of-class revisions of their midterms and portfolio letters. Their language control was even better on the two portfolio pieces, written out of class and revised after receiving feedback. Their overall error ratios of 1:26 (Factor) and 1:21 (Sassy) are among the highest (i.e., weakest) across all of the focal students, but when individual texts and contexts are considered, the picture changes considerably.

Table 6: Examples of Contextual Differences (Error Ratios)

	Timed in-class			Revised in-class		Revised out-of-class		
Student Name	Week 1 Sample	Mid-term	Week 10 Sample	Midterm Revision	Portfolio Letter	Portfolio Assgn 1 or 2	Portfolio Assgn 3	Total
Factor	1:15	1:12	1:14	1:93	1:35	1:57	1:110	1:26
Sassy	1:10	1:10	1:9	1:44	1:31	1:70	1:52	1:21
John	1:32	1:28	1:24	1:42	1:35	1:40	1:46	1:35
Janessa	1:24	1:17	1:19	1:14	1:22	1:55	1:39	1:25

In contrast, John's language control didn't vary much across writing contexts but did improve somewhat with the revised in-class pieces. Janessa's profile is even more complicated: She minimized errors on the portfolio pieces, but not when revising in-class work, as shown by her slightly higher error ratio on the revised midterm than in the in-class version. Janessa appeared to not make many edits between the versions of those texts, especially compared with the dramatic improvements made by Sassy and Factor. The students did not receive peer or teacher feedback on either the portfolio letter draft or the midterm before revising those papers, so Janessa's written language profile comports with her own self-evaluations of her slow writing process, extensive revision, and her need for help

from tutors and/or instructors (Janessa, Interviews 1-2). Within this course framework, the out-of-class portfolio papers with adequate time, multiple revisions, and feedback opportunities helped her produce her best work.

The curious case of Sunny. Although the 12 focal students varied dramatically in their language control (and across writing situations), we found that not all students were struggling writers. By our various measures, Sunny was the strongest writer in the group, but she had failed the Advanced Placement English Exam and the university's entry-level writing examination and was the only L1 focal student required to take a basic writing course. The reasons for the discrepancies in her performances appear to lie within Sunny herself, intersecting with the limitations of large-scale timed writing examinations used for placement. Sunny described herself as an "insecure and reluctant writer" (Sunny, Week 1). While interviewing, she talked candidly about how much she hated being forced to write on topics she didn't care about. However, on a topic she *did* care about (Assignment 2 portfolio paper described as a "brainchild of my heart" [Sunny, portfolio letter]), she made many surface errors with commas and quotation marks.

> I decided to write as if I was a guest journalist in a school newspaper, giving me license to write a bold, colorful article for college students. You will see in the article that the writing style is not exactly traditional because the audience is college students, who are known for their very liberal tendencies with short attention spans for textbook writing. (Sunny, Week 10 writing sample)

Sunny clearly and mindfully chose her style for the task, suggesting that if she were aware of her language errors in that paper, she likely would not have cared much. This insight may help explain why she did not pass the earlier standardized timed-writing tests, which both forced her to write on topics she had not chosen and penalized her for excessive surface errors to which she was not particularly motivated to attend. In contrast, the portfolio readers for the first-year writing course were more likely to reward her for having a strong voice and for attempting to match her style to her chosen genre and audience, as the assignment required and even emphasized (see Appendix B). Sunny's trajectory especially appears to demonstrate the variable influence and effects of student language control across assessments that reflect differing instructional values.

Alignment of Perceived and Actual Language Control

Our final research question investigated the degree to which students' views of their own language abilities corresponded with what we had observed in examining their texts. Prior research suggests that students can be effective self-assessors of their writing and language ability in quantitative studies (e.g., Isnawati, 2014; LeBlanc & Painchaud, 1985). However, our results show variability in students' self-awareness of their language needs. Sabrina, for example, in her first-week survey and first interview, gave a long list of grammar problems she thought she had and expressed generally low levels of confidence about her grammar control (Table 4), but her actual writing showed very few of those specific issues while instead an issue she had not identified, word choice, was problematic. Sunny similarly underestimated her own language skill, naming a number of problems such as awkward or wordy sentences, word choice, and subject-verb agreement, but the only pervasive error we observed in her sample of texts was the overuse of commas. In contrast, Factor, despite feeling weak in all language areas on his initial survey (Table 4), reported that grammar was not a serious writing problem for him. He highlighted text organization and vocabulary as more high-priority issues to work on, but his texts, especially those written in class, showed frequent grammar errors across a range of error types (Tables 5-6). Gloria correctly identified that she had issues with punctuation but missed that she had persistent errors with noun plurals. Only one student, Carmen, described quite accurately her observed difficulties of word choice, commas, and sentence boundaries. Other than Carmen, the focal students seemed to either internalize an unnecessarily negative view of their written language control and/or were not able to accurately identify what their most prevalent issues were.

John, the weakest writer overall among our English L1 students (Table 5), came into the term convinced that he had serious grammar problems in his writing (Table 4). Our analysis of his texts showed that he did not, but rather that he had issues with repetitive word choice that made his writing sound immature and unsophisticated, as in this example:

> After looking back at a research essay that I wrote about cocaine in Physical Education 40 (PHE 40) last year I came to a realization about myself as a writer. It was a relieving feeling to come this realization. It was a relief to me because I was able to discover what my strengths and weaknesses as a writer are. It became evident to me that the strength of my writing was the content I was able to come up with for the paper. (John, Week 1 writing sample)

Notable here are the repetitive forms of "realize," "relief," and "strength," as well as three contiguous sentences beginning with "It was…It became…" Interestingly, John indicated at the end of the course that he felt more conscious of his word choice in writing but was disappointed that the course didn't help him with grammar, his self-prescribed biggest need. However, the vocabulary project may

have raised new awareness of his word choice that he needed more than he realized.

Another language use quality that many of the case-study participants seemed to have internalized was the value of "voice" or "color" in their writing, terms they presented in their first interview and/or first-week writing sample. Ed, for example, said this about his writing style, which he attributed to his native language, Korean:

> Although somewhat unorganized and may appear distorted, my writing has "color". In Korean language words and expressions can be played around even with breaking grammar and what would be considered as "spelling errors" in English literature, and yet maintain its original meaning, and often times make it even better. For someone raised from a culture where language is used very creatively and descriptively, playing around with words out comes naturally. However this seems to be rather a poison in my writing style. My readers either become confused as to what I was trying to say, or feel very awkward about my diction and syntax. (Ed, Week 1 writing sample)

In his Week 10 writing sample (portfolio letter draft), Ed was pleased to report that he had improved in his areas of weakness without sacrificing "color":

> My strength coming in to this course was a creative writing. I used a lot of metaphors, imageries and descriptions in writing, and I am proud to say that not only do I still maintain that quality, but those qualities are strengthened. I can now create colorful sentences and form paragraphs without getting lost in my train of thought, and tie my thoughts together to form organized and descriptive paragraphs. The feedbacks from my professor and peer editing helped me greatly how to form organized paragraphs while being colorful. (Ed, Week 10 writing sample)

As already mentioned, Sunny also expressed satisfaction in her portfolio letter in which she had, in her estimation, appropriately matched her informal tone with the genre and audience she had chosen for her campus newspaper piece. From these examples, we see evidence among our focal students of at least emerging awareness that language use is an important part of expressing oneself and accomplishing rhetorical goals.

Implications and Conclusions

A finely grained case-study analysis, weaving together different parts of student writers' stories, reveals different insights than a large-scale survey or text analysis study could. With the obvious caveat that a sample of 12 case-study students, even one drawn strategically from a larger sample of nearly 300 writing students, is limited as to generalizability, we offer some possible implications of our findings.

1. *"L1" vs "L2" labels are overly broad when describing a population of student writers.* The discussion of our first theme suggests the importance of asking about students' language backgrounds and their experiences with English and writing. How might their L1 backgrounds influence their acquisition of / errors in the written L2? When did the student arrive in the new learning environment? What were their pathways to English language knowledge? What was their previous exposure to English literacy practices? Such insight helps instructors consider students as individuals with unique stories, not simply members of a large and amorphous demographic subgroup such as "L2 students."
2. *Some students expect and probably need language instruction in first-year university writing courses.* While students in this study were poor diagnosticians of their own specific language needs, they nevertheless viewed the first-year writing course as a place to receive language support. This expectation held for both L1 and L2 writers and even for those who already appeared to have a firm grasp of grammar. Teachers who are unsure about whether language support will be well-received by their students can consider these findings when deciding if or to what degree they might provide language instruction and feedback in their writing classes (see also Ferris et al., 2017 for more specific ideas on this point).
3. *Judging students primarily by what they can do under time pressure will mischaracterize many of them.* There can be a lot of institutional pressure, in the name of "rigor," and "upholding standards," to place students into classes and assess their progress by using "secure" and "reliable" testing methods. However, we saw that Sunny, a good writer who almost certainly did not need remediation, had nonetheless been forced to take a basic writing class upon university matriculation due to her poor performance on a writing exam that did not motivate her or draw out her strengths as a creative thinker with a strong voice. Similarly, we saw that Factor and Sassy appeared to be very weak writers when only their timed writing was considered but that both were quite capable of editing their work successfully when given adequate opportunity to do so.
4. *Students may not only lack confidence in their writing and grammar abilities but also may be quite misinformed about what their needs really are.* In this study, students for the most part underestimated their own competence and overstated/misstated their writing problems. One implication is that teachers should find ways to demonstrate to students, in concrete and measurable ways, what their strengths are and help them have an accurate, well-defined sense of language issues they can work on. Vague comments about improving "grammar" or "vocabulary" do not help students and simply make them anxious. Giving students a clear sense of

> what their language needs are (and are not) and how to make progress in those areas can be empowering and may improve their writing self-efficacy.

For researchers, we offer one final thought: Weaving student stories together as we did through multiple sources and then viewing the stories as a secondary data set is messy and time-consuming but ultimately satisfying. One sees things that could be missed with "cleaner," more discrete data analyses. Returning to Nation's and Macalister's (2007) framework of *needs* and *wants,* it becomes apparent that only by involving the students' voices in the conversation can we really understand the big picture of instructional design as it relates to language support in the writing class.

Obviously, this type of research carries with it a number of limitations, including the fact that our participants were limited to just 12 focal students. While their experiences were examined to explore the nuances of a larger, aggregated data set, their backgrounds reflect just one university program's student characteristics. And because of our purposeful sampling to collect experiences from students with some expressed insecurity (or lack of self-efficacy) about using language knowledge in writing, our findings in this multiple case-study are skewed toward less confident student writers. Moreover, case-study research naturally involves human interpretation, and narrative inquiry in particular is especially humanistic in nature, making broad generalizability of these results nearly impossible. Writing researchers who might want to build on the work done for this project could choose a notably distinct context, such as a college/university setting with more average achievers and/or one with a different demographic mix. The setting for the present context was both a highly competitive academic context and an extremely diverse one, linguistically and culturally. It is possible and even likely that a different setting might yield different findings as to student attitudes and experiences and as to student language abilities as demonstrated in their written texts.

Writing researchers interested in pursuing our findings further might also replicate the macro-micro approach that the project as a whole undertook. The study included nearly 300 students in 12 sections of a first-year writing course at one university, with background surveys and first- and last-week texts collected and analyzed from all of them (see Eckstein & Ferris, 2018; Ferris et al., 2017). The multiple-case study portion described in this paper added two sets of interviews and analyses of all texts written throughout the course by our 12 focal participants. This project design allows us to assert with greater confidence that our case-study participants were representatives of the larger population that we also examined, albeit in less finely grained ways.

However, our purpose in investigating students' backgrounds, needs, and wants was to illustrate the sometimes invisible diversity that students bring to an apparently rather homogenous first-year composition class where all students

successfully passed the course. In this sense, our investigation demonstrates that students' backgrounds and confidence levels differ considerably, that students have diverse language needs and wants, and that teachers ought to identify these needs with precision because students may not have an accurate self-awareness themselves. Being aware of these considerations benefits students since language issues matter in a first-year writing course—a reality that will continue to hold true as long as there are audiences for student writing who value clarity and effectiveness in their use of language to express ideas. If instructors can use insights from their students to design instructional interventions that will empower them and build their writing self-efficacy with regard to language use, that will set our increasingly diverse populations of first-year university writers on the path toward the two interacting components of self-efficacy: confidence and success.

Notes

1. Though we are aware that terms such as L1 and L2 can be problematic and even controversial, for the sake of consistency and clarity, we use them throughout this paper rather than "multilingual" or "ESL," and so forth to refer to our student participants and the subgroups of first-year composition students whom they represent.
2. The institution provided internal funding for the project to learn about the experiences of the L2 students in a first-year writing program (who in the larger sample represented 54% of the total). This is why the focal students included more L2 participants than L1, who were added for contrast.
3. Although this was a "first-year" composition course, students are not compelled to complete it during their first (freshman) year. Further, many of the L2 students had to take one or more developmental/basic writing courses before attempting first-year composition, pushing their entry into this level back to their sophomore or even later years.
4. A reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper asked if we had shown the narratives to the focal students for their corroboration. Unfortunately, because we did this follow-up analysis several years after the initial data were collected, we were unable to do so.
5. Note: This was slightly adapted both for length and for retaining anonymity.
6. Note: These were slightly abridged from the original assignment sheets for length.

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Appendix A: Text of Week 1 Survey[5]

1. Name of instructor (list of names)
2. What is your year in school? (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior)
3. In which college(s) are your major(s) (list of colleges within the university)
4. Was English the first/primary language in your home? (yes, no, English and another language)
5. Were you born in the U.S.? (yes, no)
6. Are you an international (visa) student? (yes, no)
7. Did you graduate from a U.S. high school? (yes, no)
8. What language(s) were spoken in your home when you were a young child? (list of languages)
9. At what age did you begin learning English?
   - from birth
   - 1-3 years old
   - 4-5 years old
   - 6-10 years old
   - 11-17 years old
   - 18+ years old
   - Not sure
10. Outside of school, what percentage of the time do you use English?
    - I speak only English
    - 76-100%
    - 51-75%
    - 25-50%
    - >25%
11. Have you taken any other English/writing classes at (name of university)? Please check ALL that apply. (list of possible courses)
12. Where did you receive formal English grammar instruction prior to college? Please check all that apply. (elementary school, junior high/senior high, English language classes at school, English language tutoring at home or school, nowhere--just picked it up)
13. How helpful or effective was your previous English grammar instruction? (always, usually, sometimes, never, not applicable)
14. How confident do you feel about your knowledge of English grammar? (very confident, somewhat confident, unconfident, very unconfident)
15. Below are listed common errors in grammar and mechanics often made by college writers. For each, please indicate how comfortable you are with that particular issue (frequently struggle with, sometimes struggle with, never struggle with, not sure).
    - commas

- apostrophes
- other punctuation
- word choice
- awkward/wordy sentences
- sentence boundaries (fragments, run-ons, comma splices)
- verb tense or verb form errors
- pronoun reference
- subject-verb agreement
- plural endings on nouns
- articles before nouns
- citations (MLA, etc.)

16. How would you rate your English grammar when you write a paper for school? (very strong or perfect, fairly strong, somewhat weak, very weak
17. Do you think your previous English grammar instruction helps you when you write or edit a paper? (yes, sometimes, rarely, never, not sure)
18. Would you expect a college writing course such as (name of course) to include formal grammar instruction? (yes, no, not sure/no opinion)
19. What self-editing strategies have you used to correct your own writing? (always do this, sometimes do this, never do this)
    - leave time between writing and final editing
    - read paper aloud to catch errors
    - focus on specific known areas of weakness
    - Use computer/online resources to check errors or research language choices
    - Ask someone else to proofread or edit
20. As part of ongoing research on [name of course] instruction, we would like to interview some students in this fall. These interviews will be short and scheduled at your convenience, and you will receive a small Target gift card to compensate you for your time. If you are willing to be interviewed for the project, please complete the information below (name, email address, phone number).

Appendix B: Course Writing Assignments6

The assignment prompts below have been slightly adapted/excerpted for length. They are divided among in-class writing tasks (three) and portfolio assignments (out-of-class, multiple drafts, three). The final portfolio, consisting of the students' choice of Portfolio Assignment 1 or 2, Assignment 3, and a final version of the portfolio letter drafted in class, was worth 50% of the course grade. The other 50% included homework, in-class work, the midterm, and a language analysis project (online grammar study or a vocabulary journal).

A. In-Class Writing Assignments

Week 1 In-Class Writing: Reflecting Upon a Past Writing Experience

For your homework, you were asked to choose and reread a piece of writing that you have done within the past year. Now you will have about 50 minutes to write a short introductory essay about your writing experience. You can use ideas from this writing activity for your literacy narrative paper (1st draft due next class).

For today, please write a short essay (aim for 500-750 words) that responds to this prompt:

> Please explain how you feel about yourself as a writer and/or how you would describe yourself as a writer. Use your past writing experience (especially in composing the piece of writing you chose for homework) as an illustration of your self-description. You may draw upon other past writing experiences as well if you like, but definitely include insights about the specific piece of writing you chose. Conclude your reflection by predicting or speculating upon what this writing class (UWP 1) will be like for you (feel free to be honest!).

Specifications:

- Head your paper with your name and your instructor's name and section number. Also begin with an effective title.
- Please write a complete, well organized essay with an introduction, separate paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Double-space your text and add your word count at the end in parentheses.
- When you are finished, upload your text to Smart Site Assignments ("Week 1 In-Class Writing").

Week 5 Midterm Examination: Argumentative Essay

Topic & Task: We have read and discussed three articles on the topic of whether American children are "spoiled rotten." Your task is to write an essay that explains your view of the topic by exploring the following question:

Do you believe American children today are "spoiled rotten" by their parents? If your answer is "yes," why do you think so? If "no," why not? If "maybe/it depends," when is it true (or not)?

Note: In order to answer this question effectively, you will need to define your terms (e.g., "spoiled") in the context of your own argument and evidence.

Sources: Your essay must explicitly discuss and cite at least two sources--the Kolbert essay and one of the other two responses to it—but you may choose to also incorporate the third reading, examples discussed in class, or other stories or experiences of child-rearing or parenting with which you are familiar. *However, the purpose of the essay is to clearly state and analyze YOUR emerging opinion on this topic, NOT to summarize or critically evaluate the sources.* Use the sources to discuss *your* views.

Week 10 In-Class Writing: Portfolio Letter

You will have 50-60 minutes to write a draft of your portfolio letter in class. You will submit the draft to Smart Site Assignments before the end of the class period. This counts as your required final examination, so it is *not optional.*

Please write a letter of about 2-3 double-spaced pages (500-750 words). Your audience is the portfolio readers (other UWP 1 instructors who will be reading and scoring your portfolio). Consider this letter as an opportunity to make a good first impression on your readers before they look at the pieces you have written, selected, and polished to include in your portfolio.

Write it as a letter ("Dear Portfolio Reviewers") and sign your name. You can structure your letter in any way that makes sense to you, but it should cover the following ground:

- A discussion of where you were as a writer at the beginning of this course. Look back at Homework #1 and the in-class writing you did on Day 2 to refresh your memory.
- An update on where you think you are now—and if you feel you have made progress, what experiences this quarter helped you to develop further as a

writer. You may find it helpful to review the five reflection memos you submitted with each assignment. Also think about activities you did in class, readings, feedback from peers, teachers…whatever seems most relevant.

- A discussion of the pieces you are including in your portfolio. In this part of the letter you must speak very specifically about the pieces *you* wrote and the processes you went through to write, revise, and edit them; don't just talk about the assignments in general.
- A discussion of how knowledge, skills, or experiences from this course may help you in the future to accomplish reading/writing tasks in other courses and in professional settings.
- Your thoughts about where you still need to grow and develop as a writer after this course is over.
- Anything else you want your readers to know about you, your writing, and the pieces you have included in your portfolio.

You must write a complete draft in class, but you will be able to revise and edit your letter at home before you submit your portfolio. The final draft should be carefully proofread and polished. Remember, your letter is the first impression you will give to your readers!

B. Portfolio Assignments (out-of-class, revised)

[NOTE: Students wrote both Assignments 1 and 2, but they were asked later to choose one to polish and submit with their final portfolios.']

Portfolio Assignment 1: Literacy Narrative (900-1200 words)
Purpose: In this paper you will reflect upon a significant experience you have had with writing in the recent past. The purpose is to reflect upon your own writing history and to consider your immediate goals for growth as a writer.
Audience: Write this paper in a way that would be interesting to your peers (college students around your age) and/or students a year or two younger than yourself. Do not feel that you have to provide advice—this is *your* story—but try to make your reflections lively, engaging, and meaningful.

Instructions for Writing

First, brainstorm some ideas that will help you write your own **writing narrative** (see RR #1 assignment):

- Reread a piece of writing you have done in the past year. It could be a paper you wrote for a class, a college application essay, a scholarship application, or even a blog post. The only limitations are (a) it must be recent (within the past year); and (b) it must be of significant length (say between 250-1000 words). No Facebook status updates, Tweets, or text messages!
- Now that you have looked at this piece of writing after some time has passed, what do you think of it? What are its strengths and weaknesses? If you were rewriting it further, what changes (if any) might you make?

Second, read "Write or Die" by Stephen King and "Shitty First Drafts" by Anne Lamott, both in the course reader. King and Lamott are highly successful writers. Both authors describe their own writing experiences and what they have learned from them. What do you notice from these pieces about what the authors learned about writing *and* about their style and techniques as they told their own stories?

Third, after considering your own writing and the examples of King and Lamott, write an essay in which you:

- Describe your experience in writing the particular text you have chosen: What was the context (why were you writing it)? Were there any external constraints (word/character limits, time limits, task/prompt specifications)? Was it easy or difficult for you to write, and why?
- Now that you have re-examined your text and your experience of writing it, what have you learned about yourself as a writer? **Discuss specific aspects of your text to illustrate your conclusions (including specific elements and perhaps even direct quotes)**. You may also cite ideas from King or Lamott if you would like to do so, but this is not required.
- Considering your reflections, what are some goals or hopes you might have for your growth as a writer by the end of this quarter?

Portfolio Assignment 2: Problem Paper (900-1200 words)

Purpose: To identify and analyze a problem for a specific audience. In addition to the content of your paper (the problem), you will learn more about analyzing the *rhetorical situation* of the task.

Topic: Think about a problem you have experienced or observed personally. It could be about cliques or bullying, bad teachers, conflicts with family or friends, distractions caused by technology, peers' substance abuse…whatever you choose. The only limits are (a) you must have some personal history with the problem (either

you experienced it yourself or observed it closely); and (b) you must be able to analyze and provide some perspective on this problem for a specific audience.

Task: Your job is to **describe** for your audience (see below) what the problem is from your perspective and **convince** them that this is a problem they need to think more about and/or do something about. You may also wish to **provide a proposed solution(s)** to the problem, but this will depend somewhat upon your topic (not all problems have "solutions," but they may still be worth thinking about).

Audience: You will write to an audience of your choosing that has a stake in the problem and would benefit from your insights and analysis. For example, you could write for high school English teachers, professors or TAs, parents of teenagers or young adults, incoming college freshmen, students at your old high school, or decision-makers (school board, city council, etc.). An important component of this assignment is your ability to fit your ideas, tone, and language to your specified audience. **Note:** "General Audience" or "Everyone" or "Americans" (etc.) is not acceptable. You must have a specific group of people in mind.

Genre: Choose from one of the following:

- A guest article for a high school or college newspaper
- A letter or memo to a group of decision-makers to whom you would like to address your concerns (and suggest a solution or course of action, if applicable)
- An informative essay for a handbook or web site designed for your target audience (for example, incoming freshmen at UCD, parents or teachers at your high school, etc.).

You may also propose an alternative genre of your own choosing, but you must get your instructor's permission before proceeding.

Portfolio Assignment 3: Research Paper (1200-1500 words)

Purpose: For Assignment 2 (the "problem" topic), we discussed *rhetorical situation* and *genre*. We return to these concepts with this assignment. You will select and research a topic of your choosing (see below), complete a focused rhetorical analysis of the texts/sources you find, and write about your findings. This assignment will thus further develop your research skills, your rhetorical analysis skills, and your ability to write effectively from sources.

Topic: Choose an interesting report from the mass media (TV, Internet, newspapers, blogs, etc.) on a scientific/academic topic. ("Science" can be interpreted broadly and can include social sciences such as psychology, linguistics,

education, sociology, or political science.) The topic can be anything you choose and should be something you are interested in. The only limitation is that you must also be able to find an original source—an academic/research report—from which the popular report was written.

Task: You will write a **comparative rhetorical analysis** of the differences between your popular and academic sources. The purpose of your analysis is to determine whether popular scientific journalism "dumbs down" scientific research or retains its integrity while communicating its message to a different audience. This means that your primary focus will be on investigating the different ways in which your source texts deliver their messages, not on simply reporting the content of your research. See Appendix for more information on your analysis steps.

Audience: Imagine that you are a student intern working for the popular publication (magazine, newspaper, website). The editorial board of that publication is wondering whether they have gone too far in recasting scientific research so that it is interesting and accessible to their target audience of intelligent but nonscientist readers. Write an essay in which you discuss why you agree or disagree with (or take a mixed position toward) these concerns, using specific evidence from your analysis of your sources to support your position.

Genre: You will write this as a traditional research paper with a clear introduction, body, and conclusion, strong connections and transitions. You will include in-text citations to and quotations from your two sources, following either MLA or APA format (your choice). Follow your paper with a Works Cited (MLA) or References (APA) section.

Although this is a "traditional research paper," you will still need to remember your audience, considering what will concern them or what their biases might be, what their background knowledge is, and what an appropriate tone might be. Use third person ("This journal/magazine should…") rather than first or second person ("We/you should…").

Appendix C: Week 3 and 10 Interview Questions

Week 3 Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your language background—when you started learning English and what other language(s) you speak.

2. Please tell me about your educational background—where you went to school, what kind of English language education you had (In another country? Bilingual/ESL classes? "Regular" English classes?)

3. How do you feel about your writing ability? What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? (Are these your opinions, things your teachers have told you, or both?)

4. Let's talk specifically about *grammar instruction* you received before college. Where and when did you learn about English grammar? What are your memories about it? Was the instruction helpful to you? Why or why not?

5. Do you think grammar/language issues are a problem for you when you write? If so, what kinds of language issues/errors do you struggle with? If not, why do you think you have been successful?

6. You have already started your language development project for your UWP 1 class. How is it going so far? Is it interesting, confusing, or…? Do you think the project will help your writing development? Why or why not?

7. Do you have any other comments, questions, or suggestions about how language/grammar/error issues are handled in UWP 1?

Week 10 Interview Questions

1. You have just completed UWP 1 and submitted your final portfolio. How are you feeling about how it turned out? Overall, do you think your writing improved or developed during this quarter? If so, how? If not, why do you think it didn't?

2. Specifically, how do you feel about the *language* in your final portfolio—grammar, mechanics (punctuation), vocabulary, and style? As to language choices, do you feel good/comfortable about how your final product turned out? Why or why not?

3. You have now completed the assigned language development project. Now that it's done, what is your reaction to it? (difficult, easy, time-consuming, tedious, fun, useful…)

4. Were you aware/conscious of anything you learned from your language development project when you were finalizing your portfolio? If so, what (or in what ways)? If not, why not?

5. Do you think the work you did in UWP 1 will help you with your future classes and writing? In what ways? Will the language development project help you? Why or why not?

6. What suggestions do you have for future UWP teachers/classes about the best ways to help students develop or improve their language use in their writing?

Appendix D: Language Use Scoring Rubric

Score	General Descriptor	Specific Descriptors
6	Excellent language use	There are very few if any errors of any type (lexical, syntactic, mechanical). Lexical choices are sophisticated and appropriate. Sentences are varied and rhetorically effective.
5	Strong language use	Syntactic and lexical errors will occur at this level. They are, however, generally infrequent. Meaning is never obscured by errors. Vocabulary choices are solid and appropriate. Sentences are well written and demonstrate strong command of complex sentence patterns.
4	Competent language use	Frequency of local errors keeps this writing from the next level. There may be some awkward wording, but meaning is not obscured. Sentence variety and complexity are very good.
3	Underdeveloped language use	Local errors are frequent and sometimes distracting; some global errors may occur at this level. Vocabulary choices are usually accurate but may be repetitive or simple and/or ineffective (cliché, informal, etc.) Sentence choices are usually simple and do not show much variety. When the writer attempts more complex structures, the grammar sometimes breaks down.
2	Weak language use	Writing at this level is generally understandable but has many errors. Global errors that obscure meaning may be present but not frequent. Vocabulary choices may be occasionally inaccurate and even confusing. Sentences are predominantly simple. If more complex structures are attempted, grammar breaks down consistently or frequently.
1	Unacceptable language use	Errors of all types are frequent, distracting, and obscure meaning. Lexical errors cause processing difficulties. Sentences are out of control and very hard to understand.
0	Unable to score	No submission or other problem