

## Chapter 13

\*\* Semke (1984) *Effects of the red pen*

Fathom & Whalley (1990) *Teacher response to student writing: Focus on form versus content*

\*\* Lalande (1982) *Reducing composition errors: An experiment*

-VanPatten (1998) *Perceptions of perspectives on the term “communicative”*

**The proficiency of “advanced” students.** Who *are* the students at this level, and what are their problems and needs? ACTFL developed its evaluation system on the basis of testing procedures for true proficiency, i.e., the ability to communicate spontaneously and effectively with realistic tasks. The pertinent ACTFL proficiency levels are **Intermediate**, **Advanced**, and **Superior**, as summarized below (based on Educational Testing Service 1982 and Omaggio 1993).

**Intermediate:** Unlike **ACTFL Novices** at the first level, whose reliance on **memorized, rehearsed material restricts what they can do**, **Intermediates** create with language and hold their own in talking about survival-level needs and personal interests. But they tend to speak (and process input) in **single sentences; and especially when dealing outside the immediate here and now, they rely on their native syntax, show frequent formal and lexical errors, and omit or confuse grammatical units—inaccuracies that often lead to miscommunication. Despite exposure to a second-year “review grammar,” their active command of forms, structures, and vocabulary remains limited and insecure. In writing, they generate longer passages but with the same kinds of problems as in their speech. Their main weakness is an inability to sustain discourse: sentences tend to be short, simple, and juxtaposed, with few transitions and little informational flow for cohesive paragraphs.**

**Advanced:** Advanced speakers take a more active role in conversation and can deal with unforeseen complications. They create discourse with growing length, coherence, and informativeness: they show strength in functions such as description, summarizing, and particularly narration, and they adopt a rhetorical structure (e.g., organization into paragraph units). They are extending their control over the grammar that makes all this possible: pronominal reference, non-present tenses, basic syntax, descriptive modifiers, and discourse markers and links. Yet a number of errors continue in areas like gender and agreement, verb inflection, and prepositions, and some of them may be entrenched (fossilized). There are consistent error patterns with, or skittish avoidance of, options like subordinate clauses and mood contrasts, non-reflexive *se*, syntactic transforms, and structures like *hace...que* that are pragmatically specialized and strongly different from their native language. Their vocabulary is adequate for areas in their experience but often lacks variety, and the gaps may inhibit elaboration on things they would *like* to say but cannot. Unlike Superiors, Advanced writers have trouble hypothesizing and supporting points of view.

**Superior:** Superiors have an extensive, varied vocabulary and can paraphrase around gaps. In grammar, they may show minor sporadic mistakes, but no consistent error patterns even with less frequent inflections and structures. Their fluency and command of grammatical options let them handle higher-level tasks: hypothesizing, arguing, writing research papers and critical analyses,

etc. Their chief limitation is now *stylistic*: it is difficult for them to tailor a message socio-culturally to different audiences by adopting distinct styles (registers). While their speech and writing are accurate, expressive, and capable of handling virtually any topic, they may lack the idiomatic flourishes that characterize natives and especially literary writers.

**ACTFL's proficiency levels** "Intermediate, Advanced, Superior" **must not be equated with academic course labels like intermediate and advanced Spanish**. As much as one would like to have Superiors for mature work like literary analyses and explorations of cultural issues, many students entering "advanced" classes (after "intermediate" or second-year ones) are in fact still ACTFL Intermediates, often "Intermediate High": they show signs of Advanced performance but have trouble sustaining it because their base level is still Intermediate. Their own typical self-diagnosis, "I have trouble conjugating verbs," is an honest acknowledgment of one salient aspect of their linguistic insecurity. A second group in so-called "advanced" courses has recently reached the ACTFL Advanced level, especially after an extended immersion experience, but they make mistakes that detract from their meaning and still show a variety of gaps. A third group consists of "heritage" Spanish students, representing a sprinkling or a sizable number according to local circumstances. Their proficiency may lie at any of these levels depending on their particular backgrounds; many have stellar oral skills, but less familiarity with standard written usage.

**Addressing student needs:** Although research is revealing interesting trends in the **stages of acquisition of individual grammatical items** (e.g., preterite/imperfect or *ser/estar*), even students at the same overall level of proficiency **vary greatly** in the particulars that they have acquired and choose to use. Adverbial gerunds or the control of narrative pace will be new to one student, familiar to but not actively mastered by a second, and already acquired by a third.

**Let's review. The treatment of grammar in language learning.** There are two kinds of linguistic knowledge: explicit knowledge *about* the language, and Implicit knowledge or competence, which has been honed into an automatic *skill* with it. **Implicit knowledge** is what underlies true communicative competence and proficiency in speaking and writing. **Explicit knowledge** is not sufficient in itself: one can cite rules for verb forms but remain unable to negotiate a purchase, tell a story, or write an appropriate letter. Nor is it necessary: we all learn the grammar of our native language through input, internalizing its rules without memorizing them from explicit statements. But it has been widely assumed that for adult learners, an explicit presentation of relevant grammar can lead to implicit knowledge as a kind of short-cut alternative to experiential learning.

Among specialists, however, the pendulum has swung back and forth on this issue. In the **grammar-and-translation** approach that dominated language teaching until a few decades ago, explicit grammar was overemphasized. Based on nineteenth-century approaches to teaching Latin, this method consisted in having students memorize rules and paradigms, recite them, identify forms in readings ('third-person plural pluperfect subjunctive'), and use this knowledge to translate, generally from the second or foreign language (L2) to students' first or native language (L1). Actual communication in the L2 was not a goal, and little implicit knowledge resulted. Traces of this approach survive, as when students are asked to chant whole conjugations ("*amo amas ama amamos amáis aman*") and to translate instead of composing their own story or essay; but in most quarters grammar-and-translation has been displaced by newer methods emphasizing active communication in the language.

A common base for these communicative methods has been the **monitor model** of S. Krashen (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen 1982). Among other hypotheses, this model proposed that the real grammar (competence) behind one's creative ability to communicate in L2 is subconsciously **acquired** from input (listening, reading), just as in L1 acquisition. Grammar that is studied explicitly is not **acquired** but only **learned**, and instead of passing into competence, it goes to the Monitor, a kind of mental module that can only watch over and correct one's output, not help to generate it. By this theory, it is through exposure to communication in the language that students internalize the principles of using adjectives with nouns; studying tables and rules for adjectival agreement does not contribute to this ability but only feeds into self-correction of form that has little to do with the expression of meaning.

This model has been influential but also **misinterpreted** (see Whitley 1993, 1997). Assuming a dichotomy between **(monitored) form and (communicated) meaning**, some concluded that errors of form aren't important except as a stylistic matter, and that "learned" grammar and therefore "for-focused instruction" are irrelevant to learning to communicate. Many textbook writers therefore **shrank** their grammatical presentations to more "streamlined" statements that looked simpler but were also simplistic. Others **revamped** "Grammar and Composition" courses so as to focus on principles of writing, reducing grammar to matters of form to review during editing, its only apparent function in the Monitor Model. Instructors were even advised to **dispense with grammar entirely**, and some editors came to believe in "grammarless composition."

Even among proponents of the **Monitor Model**, these subsequent developments **seemed extreme**. Terrell (1991), who adapted the Monitor Model for his Natural Approach, showed that the presumed dichotomy between “form” and “meaning” is untenable, since errors of form do affect intelligibility to native speakers. He held that explicit grammar instruction (**if applied properly**) is helpful or even essential in focusing students on patterns they are to acquire from input. Moreover, Krashen & Terrell (1983) admitted that learners who had already acquired basic communication skills (i.e., **intermediate and advanced students**) could indeed benefit from explicit grammar instruction, especially for “**academic writing**”—i.e., composition. VanPatten (1987) similarly outlined a curriculum that gave increasing weight to formal grammar study, arguing that with proper presentation and application it can be “mapped” into students’ implicit grammar rather than just staying in the Monitor. More recently, other scholars (Melles 1997, Doughty & Williams 1998, Ellis 2002) have argued that “form-focused instruction” is useful or even essential in communicative language teaching: the difference from grammar-and-translation is not the absence of grammar, but the way it is presented and applied.

What does this debate mean for the advanced composition course? “Grammarless composition” could only result in a list of uninflected unconnected words, such as a grocery list; on the other hand, traditional approaches did overemphasize grammar for its own sake. The philosophy of this book is that students at this level do benefit from explicit grammar study provided that it is functionally tied to realistic communicative tasks and not studied as an end in itself—in our view, the real thrust of the rejection of grammar-and-translation. In addition, as in the Natural Approach (Terrell et al. 1986), **this grammar is studied *outside* of class so that class time is devoted to activities that promote expressive skills incorporating that grammar.**

Some teachers enjoy discussing and analyzing grammar, and they apparently expect the same of their students when they ask questions like “¿Qué significa el imperfecto?” This use of language to talk about language is called **metalanguage**, and it is quite appropriate for **linguistics courses** in which students already have an intuitive mastery of the language and an interest in pursuing research on advanced questions. But it is not a normal communicative function (Spanish speakers just don’t go around asking each other “¿Qué significa el imperfecto?”) and it is less appropriate for courses intended to develop this mastery in the first place. The way to determine whether students understand the imperfect after reading a description of it is through their success with it in realistic narrative tasks.

**Thus, we strongly recommend that each lesson’s grammar presentation be assigned for *prior study* to minimize the need for “metalanguage” monologues in class.** Advanced students can and should prepare the material outside of class and should come ready to put its main points to work. In class, you might briefly point out special difficulties or reinforce main points with examples or input-rich “teacher talk” (e.g., briefly share what you used to do as a child, with imperfects, then invite a student to do the same), but it is important that students take the main responsibility for preparing the material so that most of the session can be devoted to true communication by and among the students—not meta-language.

**NOTE:** Frequent use of **visual aids** can promote faster comprehension and progress through the material. Note that you can save an enormous amount of valuable class time (to cover more activities) by reserving the board just for *unforeseen* material that *must* be written, while relying on prepared handouts, transparencies, or computer projection for everything (examples, lists, diagrams, charts, visual cues for exercises, etc.) that can be anticipated ahead of time as part of your lesson plan.

**Maintaining the pace for language acquisition.** A language's grammar runs broad and deep, and no one course can cover it in its entirety. Lower levels focus on the basics and downplay (or omit entirely) explanations of passives, pluperfect subjunctives, alternative word orders, and prepositional nuances. After all, these are peripheral for Novice and Low Intermediate communication, and continuing students should encounter them in the next course. But expectations rise for the advanced course: students now need even the "peripherals" in their reading, writing, and preparation for serious use of the language, and this may be their last systematic study of the language (as opposed to literature and culture). Moreover, departments assume that this course will consolidate students' control of grammar after years of different selections and treatments of "central" and "peripheral" areas in previous study. Even so, it is very tempting to slow down and give more time to, say, preterite/imperfect when students fail to show mastery in one pass. **Before tossing the syllabus to the winds, though, and dropping later material or other kinds of writing, remember that it is normal for students to continue having problems with the material for several reasons:**

**1. To the extent that the distinction between (learned) "explicit knowledge" and (acquired) "implicit knowledge" is valid, the former can be crammed into short-term memory (as for a test) while it takes more time for the latter to emerge.** Students can drill past-tense morphology and memorize rules; but inevitably they make mistakes when they move beyond controlled exercises to expressive work like compositions where focus shifts more to content than to form. Yet it is in this kind of communicative work—composing a story and then reworking it—where they develop implicit knowledge as they try out hypotheses (sometimes wrong ones) about how to apply general rules to specific meanings and situations. The errors last until experience with trying out the language to convey one's own messages yields useful implicit knowledge. The solution, then, is to continue to subsequent lessons that keep reinforcing the role of past tenses in new situations that encourage their use, not to spend another session on the rules to keep rehashing them.

**2. In their "interlanguage" version of the foreign language or L2, students draw upon more than the rules they have studied.** **First**, there is knowledge transferred from their native language, which helps sometimes but interferes in cases like the Spanish tense system. Students who are used to a single past tense in English naturally tend to merge preterite and imperfect at first, or use them interchangeably, or generalize one at the expense of the other, or wrongly attach them to crutches like "was going, used to go." **Second**, there are natural developmental errors: like children learning Spanish natively, adult students overgeneralize and simplify patterns (\*yo trabajó, \*andaron, \*sentió). **Third**, to cope with uncertainty, they try out compensatory communication Strategies: e.g., use the imperfect with *ser*, *estar*, and after *mientras*, otherwise play it safe with the preterite. These problems cannot be eliminated in just one or two sessions, but only through continuing input and practice with past tenses in their

natural context, narration, and in conjunction with the other tools of narration that continue to be presented.

**3. Finally, acquisition is driven by *communicative need*, not mere exposure to L2.** A major thrust of proficiency research has been that despite *contact* with the past tenses since the first year of study, learners do not show much accuracy with them until the Advanced level. One needs to progress from speaking in single sentences in the here-and-now and in simple adjacency pairs (question + answer, assertion + reaction) to narrating whole discourse with temporal sequencing in order for past tenses (and tense and aspect distinctions in general) to come to have genuine meaning or personal usefulness.

While the study of relevant grammar helps prepare for composition, **it is the act of composing and reworking one's ideas in speech and writing that really promotes acquisition of grammar.**

It follows that not all points will be mastered right away: some may only be acquired later when students return to them to work out the meanings they want to communicate in their own writing.

**Classes that pause to recite forms and rules or to keep analyzing past-tense morphology are engaging in metalanguage that is not the best use of available time for language acquisition and preparation for writing.**

In short, **incomplete mastery after a first pass is not sufficient reason to stay on a lesson until students "get it."** On the practical side, a rehash is boring for what they know (explicitly) already; it also sends the message that they are no longer responsible for their learning. When the teacher maintains a challenging pace, students tend to keep up; when their coach slows down, so do they, and *without necessarily learning better*. Dwelling too long on an item halts progress toward new material and tasks that reenter old material in a natural way and that promote acquisition of implicit knowledge.

**The treatment of composition.** Composition has often been treated as a thing or *product*, “a composition” that one writes up (perhaps with little preparation for the task) and turns in for a single evaluation. In recent decades, it has been seen more as a *process*, the act of “composing” one’s ideas and reworking them to improve their impact on the reader. The latter view, **process-based composition**, emphasizes the approach.

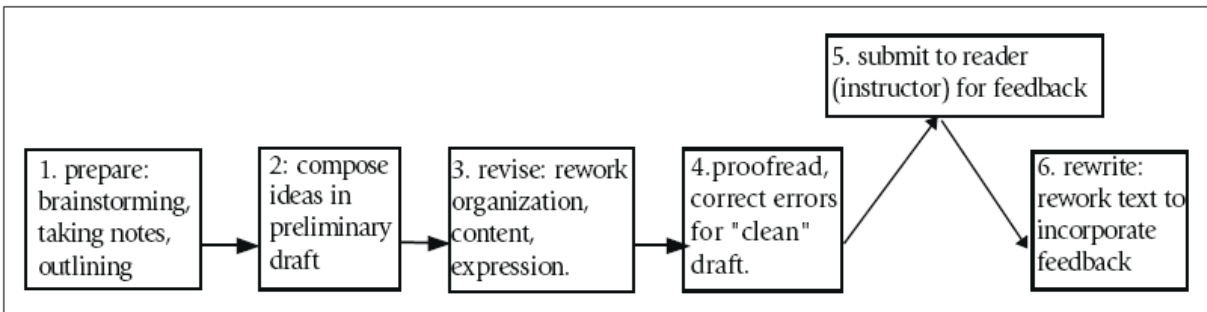


Figure IM.d Process-based composition

Ideally, steps 5 and 6 might continue: a writer would keep reworking his/her ideas in response to readers’ reactions until they were in their best possible form. In reality, most courses only have time for one rewrite, which is the constraint that we assume in this book: after appropriate preparation (prewriting), students compose their ideas on a subject, revise and correct their text, turn it in for the instructor’s feedback, and then work to improve it in the rewrite. What has especially promoted this process is the personal computer: the Web facilitates any preliminary research needed, and word-processing permits any degree of revision and correction before submission. Even this last step can remain electronic when the document is emailed to the instructor’s computer to be “marked” with “Insert Comment,” without benefit of pen and paper.

While most writing-intensive books today assume process-based composition, there is less consensus on how much its techniques need to be described and practiced in a Spanish course. Some textbook writers have opted for an extensive treatment, explaining “from ground up” the general principles of composition and rhetoric, adding an orientation to word-processing tools and providing for several sessions of prewriting and revision activities for each composition. But in the feedback that we received from our students, they considered such coverage an unnecessary (and boring) repeat of freshman English composition. They were more interested in the specifically *Spanish* tools for successful writing, and indicated that they felt ready to write after a one-session review of each type of writing and the special challenges of carrying it out in Spanish.

**Correcting and grading written work.** Any composition course is inherently writing-intensive: students expect their writing to improve, and that requires abundant practice and continuous feedback.

After each session throughout the course, they should have at least a couple of exercises assigned for written work in order to continue practicing particular items and applying them to self-expression, and for most sessions, they are *also* simultaneously working on their compositions.

*Both* kinds of outside writing, “**micro**” (focused skill exercises) and “**macro**” (whole essays and compositions) are essential for strengthening their writing ability.

Thus, your students must understand from the outset that developing proficiency and confidence in writing Spanish takes a lot of hard work. So should you, their instructor. With discrete-point exercises, the task is simple; in fact, when there is only one possible answer, self-correction is preferable. But the most effective writing tasks for deeper language acquisition are open-ended, encouraging individual expression for which there can be no answer key or set answers; and grading those can become a time-consuming chore that overwhelms the instructor.

The research on correction and grading is extensive but inconclusive. Some authorities (VanPatten 1986, Semke 1984) have disputed the need for overt correction, while others (Omaggio 1993, Chan 2006) have endorsed signaling errors for students themselves to correct. Some have defended **Analytical Scoring** (Birckbichler 1981), which separately evaluates aspects such as content, organization, and form; others (Magnan 1985, Canale et al. 1988) have advocated **Holistic Scoring**, assigning a single overall grade, as better and of course simpler. Thus, analytical scorers might take the criteria and assign point values out of 100 to each component, or they might elaborate the “good”/“not good” definitions into specific descriptions of what constitutes performance graded as A, B, C, D, and F. Holistic scorers, on the other hand, might include some information (see table below) in the syllabus as a general indication of what they will be looking for, but otherwise make a single integrated judgment (of A, A-, B +, etc.) of overall success for each paper without separating the components. **(We use both kinds: holistic on homework and compositions, analytical on the exam.)**

components	not good	good
application of material	didn't follow instructions; unsuccessful application of what was studied	carried out the assignment fully and promptly according to instructions; incorporated feedback; applied the material fully and effectively.
vocabulary	overreliance on plain, ordinary words ( <i>bueno, persona...</i> ); misuse of dictionary (L. 5); little effort to improve and expand vocabulary	successful use of more precise, expressive words/idioms; adoption of relevant vocabularies presented in the lessons and <i>Distinciones</i> in preparation for writing.
content & organization	general statements with few supporting details; careless or confusing development of ideas; unclear or even unintelligible expression	expressive, clear statements; effective organization and transitions; good flow of ideas across sentences and paragraphs with interesting, informative, creative details
grammar	little progress; errors persist after being pointed out; failure to master basics like verb and pronoun forms; goofs like " <i>el mujer</i> " that are inexcusable at this level.	accuracy with forms and increasingly, their meaning and function; success in resolving problems; more powerful and interesting writing due to effective use of structures practiced for a given lesson, or in the chapter for a composition

Figure IM.e Grading criteria

Yet a third technique, **Selective Scoring**, marks errors in general but focuses on success with one featured point at a time (e.g., agreement, or a specific tense featured in the lesson) for grading purposes.

Teachers themselves show different preferences on this issue, and so do students, who often expect fuller feedback on what's wrong with their writing than teachers realize (Leki 1991). Appropriate techniques also depend on the nature of the course: many studies that have been cited in this debate were based on beginning foreign language students or on students writing in their native language, and it is difficult to extrapolate findings for either group to the advanced foreign language student, who has acquired more than the beginner but far less than the native. In practice, most instructors develop intermediate positions, recognizing that errors are part of the hypothesis-testing of language acquisition (see Gregersen 2003) but that feedback is essential to that process.

The feedback should include both positive encouragement of students' successes and an indication of problems; but the assessment of those problems is relative to the situation, and many of us are guided by principles such as the following:

**Observation 1:** Native speakers generally ignore mistakes in the give-and-take of conversation when these do not affect comprehension; but in formal writing, errors become more irritating, especially as they accumulate in extended text.

**Implication:** Minor errors can often be disregarded in oral work; but in writing they need to be pointed out, with persistent ones receiving more attention than sporadic ones.

**Observation 2:** Errors in spelling, in gender and agreement (*\*la problema*), and in lexis (such as English imports presumably excused by quotation marks) are expected from beginners, far less so from students with more experience with the language.

**Implication:** Let students know that frequent errors of these types are inappropriate at the advanced level and should decrease if genuine learning is taking place. Such errors are inexcusable when writers can proofread their work and use a dictionary or spelling/grammar checker.

**Observation 3:** Even relatively advanced students are unlikely to have acquired low-frequency oddities (e.g., *quepo*), complex rules (mood in adverbial and conditional clauses), distinctions beyond their own experience (the various Spanish words for ‘argue’ or ‘handle’), and subtle expressive preferences (*irse en coche* for ‘drive away’ instead of the English calque *manejar lejos*); but they are capable of mastering these with sufficient attention to them.

**Implication:** Correct such mistakes at first appearance in a constructive way (without counting off for them); but expect students to learn from the correction and to show increasing accuracy, especially once the relevant points have been systematically taken up and practiced. Students who keep making the same errors are not progressing in their command over the language.

**Observation 4:** Errors in form can and do make a difference in a highly inflected language like Spanish. Using *dije* for *dijo* in a story suddenly injects the narrator at an odd point; *se sienta mal* for *se siente mal* expresses a different mood or a distinct action that is funny in context; *Marta se gusta* depicts a strange image that is far from the intended *A Marta le gusta*; and the English-based *\*te quieren ir* (for *quieren que vayas*) means nothing at all to Spanish speakers.

**Implication:** In your feedback, make it clear that such errors are not just “improper grammar” or “misagreement” but convey different meanings; and as a reader, react honestly to contextually odd senses, nonsequiturs, and unintelligible passages (including those that are “intelligible” only through back-translation into English). Students are motivated to strive for greater accuracy when they understand the effect of errors on their meaning and the impact on their reader.

Assessing the quality of a composition and pointing out specific strengths and weaknesses entails a lot of work. To ease the burden, some authorities (Gaudiani 1981) have advocated **peer correction** or **peer editing**, whereby class members discuss and revise each other’s written work in small groups.

Collaborative writing programs in networked computers have made this procedure easier: teamwork is possible from brainstorming through creation to revision and correction, before anything ever has to be printed out. Such group-work definitely has its advantages. When examining and reworking others' compositions, students can hone proofreading skills, improve the monitoring function, and develop a better understanding of what readers expect—and of what writers must anticipate. Peers also help catch each other's mistakes before they appear on the final draft. And when substituted for teacher grading, peer correction might also mean fewer papers for *you*, their instructor, to have to evaluate outside of class.

**On the other hand, peer correction also has some **drawbacks:****

- If papers are peer-edited in class, discussing two or three can **consume an entire session**, and discussing a whole set will take days. This means less time for activities fostering acquisition of the material needed for writing other kinds of composition; and as a result, grammar is forced into a mere reference role—rules and paradigms to consult (and then forget) when editing, instead of resources to gain control over in preparation for the writing process.

- Students can be good critics of a paper's general expository success, **but cannot yet take their instructor's place in perceiving numerous language problems**. They accept “Spanglish” syntax that would baffle natives (*\*Te quieren ir*), miss awkward or wordy phrasings that have a better Spanish equivalent, and tolerate choppy discourse (“Mi madre es muy buena. Mi madre es simpática. Ella es alta...”) that should be linked better at this level. Students should learn to see their work from the viewpoint of the reader; but only the teacher can assume the role of a *native* or *native-like* reader.

- Peer correction of papers from members of the class can create **needless stress**. Whether as “product” or as “process,” composition is a very personal creation; and as deflating as your red marks can be, peer critiques can arouse feelings of defensiveness or loss of face, even when anonymity has been agreed on. Many students also assume that if the expert who is teaching them assigns something to improve their ability and counts it as part of their grade, they are entitled to his/her own prompt, direct, professional feedback and evaluation.

Consequently, **we do not see peer correction as a substitute for teacher grading**, although it **does** serve as a useful prewriting activity if writers entail no personal risk and readers receive guidance about what to focus on.

**If there is little alternative to teacher grading, there *are* ways to lighten the load:**

**1. Expect students to resolve lingering problems through their own individual review.**

Remember that this is *not* an introductory course; when dealing with verbs, for example, your job is to promote and evaluate Advanced-level use of the Spanish tense system for more effective oral and written communication; it is *not* to keep correcting errors in basic preterite morphology that students ought to have mastered by this point.

**2. Conduct exercises *orally* whenever possible:**

- a. **Elicit full-class responses when answers are limited, and pose a few illustrative questions to individuals for open-ended questions.** Correct miscommunications orally in a natural, unobtrusive way (“¿Cómo?” or “¿Quiere usted decir...?”). Since writing on the board takes more time and often veers off into tangents, limit it to when written confirmation is necessary (as with odd spellings) and/or when writing skills are being focused on.
- b. **Choose class activities that students themselves can carry out in small groups or pairs.**

**3. Reserve for homework those exercises (or continuations of exercises) that will take more time, thought, and dictionary work, then take them up and grade them holistically, signaling errors *but not correcting* them.**

**4. With a composition, read the draft and signal errors, but also add comments as a reader, as positive and encouraging as possible, on content and organization.** After students correct the indicated weaknesses in their rewrite, assign the final version a holistic grade based on overall success and the resolution of both grammatical and expository problems. We also advise assigning a separate grade to *each* version, because this encourages a stronger effort on the first version, motivating students to proofread better and decreasing the work needed on the rewrite.

Suggestions (3) and (4) for written work outside the class can **ease your load** by returning the responsibility for correction to your students, who can learn from it. **Some teachers signal errors by just underlining or circling them,** but research shows that students then misunderstand what needs to be changed—tense, mood, agreement, wording, spelling, etc. (Frantzen & Rissel 1987). Much more useful is an **agreed-on code**, brief enough to be manageable but extensive enough to cue the most common problems. See attached *Símbolos para la corrección*. On the other hand if the problem is consistent (rather than a sporadic “accident”) or if it might be unclear to the student from your symbol alone, refer him/her to the appropriate grammar. If the problem is particularly serious, invite the student to a one-on-one conference with you. However the feedback is given, it must be **prompt**: both homework and composition drafts should be turned in punctually and returned in the next session in order to be of optimal value to students.

Finally, digital resources can also help reduce errors and promote acquisition. Below, we summarize our experiences with four of them.

**1. Online dictionaries.** These can be more convenient than a large desk dictionary, but many are just data bases that simplistically match words and meanings without attention to nuance and usage.

**2. Spell checkers and grammar checkers.** These aids began as options, but today they are standard features in word-processing programs, and their use cannot reasonably be excluded. Since they point out certain mechanical errors for writer correction, they can lighten your grading load while also alerting students to the kinds of errors they commonly make (and need to monitor better). On the other hand, checkers vary in their power to discern problems, and even the best of them are insensitive to context and meaning. *Sentió* is nonexistent and is easily flagged from an electronic data base of Spanish words and forms; *sentó* does exist but the checker will probably not recognize it as an error for *sintió* (or for *se sintió*, or for *se sentó*, or for *senté* or *sentía* or *sentaba*...). Likewise, *la ama* is an error if meant as article + noun, but perfectly grammatical as pronoun + verb, and not all programs can parse the string for the difference. Or to take an example from English, one grammar checker objected to the title “A study of how meaning is created by sign processes” and because of its programmer’s personal bias against passives, suggested the meaningless substitute “Sign processes create a study of how meaning.”

Like mature writers, students at this level must learn to accept this degree of unreliability in an aid that they can accept or overrule in their better judgment of what they actually mean in the language.

**3. The Web.** For the purposes of a Spanish grammar and composition course, there is nothing wrong with students using the Web as a quick source of properly cited information for their essays (as opposed to a quick source of ready-made essays that are submitted as their own work, which is quite a different matter). In fact, the Web has another use that you might pass along to your students: a rough guide to current L2 usage. For example, a student wondering which is more typical of Spanish, *carezco* or *me falta*, can type each into a search engine, enclosing a group like *me falta* in quote marks to hold it together as a unit, and specifying Spanish pages only (in “Advanced Search”). As of this writing, *me falta* turns up 10 times as many hits as *carezco*. Likewise, in checking whether *cepillarse los dientes* is more typical than *cepillarse sus dientes*, the user finds the former over 1000 times more frequent. There are obvious **drawbacks** to this method since it gives only a rough idea of frequency (a finer analysis would be needed to determine which variant is favored for which contexts and which senses), but it does give students another source of input for language acquisition and it can reduce the number of things you must mark up in their work.

**4. Electronic translators.** This is one resource that you will *not* want students to use in your course. Online translation programs are provided free of charge at several websites: just compose in English, copy the text and paste it in, click on any desired language, and the text is instantly converted to a quasi-intelligible translation. Despite their **poor quality** and likely violation of your honor code, online translators have become a **big temptation to foreign-language students** when they are in a hurry to finish their homework and assume it will go unnoticed.

Instead of making accusations that will be **difficult to prove**, you should remind students that resort to online translators only hurts *them*, not you, by subverting the very skill development that they signed up for in your course.

The teaching of composition, and of foreign language composition in particular, continues to evolve, and numerous issues remain. (For a summary of research, see Reichelt 2001.) Whatever your policies may be on the issues we have explored here, one basic truth remains: in any writing-intensive course, *both* parties must understand their mutual commitment to a lot of hard work and discipline: there is just no way around that, because one only learns to write by writing—and writing for someone who is going to read it and respond. At the very least, though, much of the burden of correction can be placed on the students, who can learn from their errors and monitor them better in the future.