HOW CONTENT AREA TEACHERS MARK WRITTEN WORK: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION[1]

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In designing English language courses, we often take into account the needs of students, as well as of other stakeholders in the academic community. One such stakeholder is the content area teacher, who is traditionally viewed as a beneficiary of effective English language teaching (ELT).

Using a survey, this paper looks into how these content area teachers mark their students' written work. The survey hopes to determine the criteria used by these teachers in grading reports and essays. As the writer analyzes how content area teachers mark written work, she also hopes to draw implications for English language curriculum and instruction in Ateneo de Manila University. In the end, it is argued that content area teachers are not just beneficiaries of ELT; they are also active partners of English language teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Some weeks ago, the English Department received an email message from a Computer Science teacher complaining about his student's exam. The message reads:

> Is there something that you guys are not doing in the English department that you are supposed to do? I gave a test and one of the questions asked for the converse, inverse, and contrapositive of certain implications. Here are the answers:
>
> *If it is not rain today then I'm not stay at home.*
> *If I'm not stay at home then it will not rain today.*
> *If I sleep UNTILL noon then it means I stay up late.*
> *If I not stay up late, it is not necessary that I sleep until noon.*
> *If I'm not sleep until noon, then I'm not stay up late.*

Can I send this student back to you guys for tutoring (gratis)?
Or should he ask for a refund from Ateneo?

Although the email message was written in jest (as the Computer Science teacher claims), this message and the reactions it drew from other non-English teachers (or content-area teachers) are symptomatic of an attitude that prevails among the faculty of the Loyola Schools of Ateneo de Manila University. It is an attitude that tends to confine the task of English language teaching (ELT) within the borders of the English Department.

Given his student's exam, the Computer Science teacher certainly had a reason to worry about the students' English language proficiency. His first impulse, of course, was to wonder whether the English Department was doing its job. As English language teaching professionals, our knee-jerk reaction, of course, was to defend ourselves. Armed with socio-linguistic and language learning theories and studies that, we believe, content-area teachers are uninformed about, we retorted:...but this deterioration in English language proficiency is a world-wide phenomenon... but we cannot fix in just six to 12 units of language courses what had been produced in 12 years of schooling...

That incident, however, led us to ask more questions: Should such comments from content-area teachers be dismissed by the English teachers as encroaching into ELT territory? Since content-area teachers, not just students, also benefit from the success of ELT in a school, shouldn't these teachers also take a more active role in ELT?

In the hope of forging a genuine partnership between English teachers and content-area teachers in Ateneo de Manila University, I thought it best to conduct a survey that would look into how content area teachers marked their students' written work. The survey hoped to determine the criteria used by these teachers in assigning grades to written reports, essays, and exams. In this investigation of how content-area teachers mark written work, I hope to draw implications for English language curriculum and instruction in the Loyola Schools of Ateneo de Manila University.

Ateneo de Manila University, a Jesuit university in Manila, has a student population in the college of not more than 7,000 undergraduate and graduate students. In the Philippines, students of Ateneo de Manila are recognized as having a higher English language proficiency than students from most Philippine universities. There are four Schools that make up the Loyola Schools (college department) of Ateneo de Manila: (1) School of Humanities, to which the English Department belongs; (2) School of Science and Engineering; (3) School of Social Sciences, and (4) School of Management. In the Loyola Schools, there are more than 250 full-time faculty members. This survey did not include teachers in the English Department.

2. INVESTIGATION

The survey questionnaire I distributed had two parts. The first part required a structured response from the content-area teachers on six items; the second part was an open-ended section asking for other criteria for marking papers.
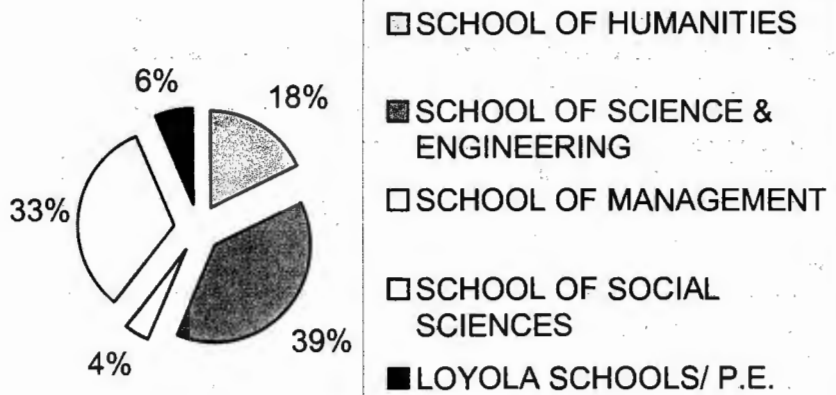
Table 1. The Questionnaire

PART ONE. Please tick the box that corresponds to your response to the statements below.				
Whenever I mark written work (reports, projects, papers, exams, and essays), I...	**Always**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**
1. Give weight to the quality of the student's ideas about his/her chosen subject				
2. Consider the smooth and orderly flow of ideas				
3. Consider the precise and appropriate use of words				
4. Consider the correctness of grammar, such as subject-verb agreement and verb tense consistency				
5. Consider the correctness of writing mechanics, such as spelling and punctuation				
6. Look for evidence of research in the written work (presence of citations and bibliographical information)				

PART TWO. Please answer the following question.

Other than those mentioned above, what other criteria do you consider whenever you mark written work?

Of 235 full-time content-area teachers surveyed, 94 (or 40 percent) turned in their accomplished questionnaires. These 94 faculty members come from the following Schools in the university.[2]
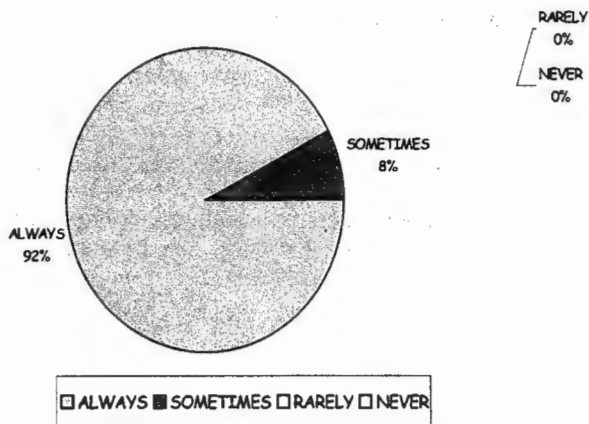
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[2] In the Loyola Schools, the PE Department does not belong to any of the four Schools.

Figure 1: Profile of the Respondents

- □ SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
- ▣ SCHOOL OF SCIENCE & ENGINEERING
- □ SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT
- □ SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
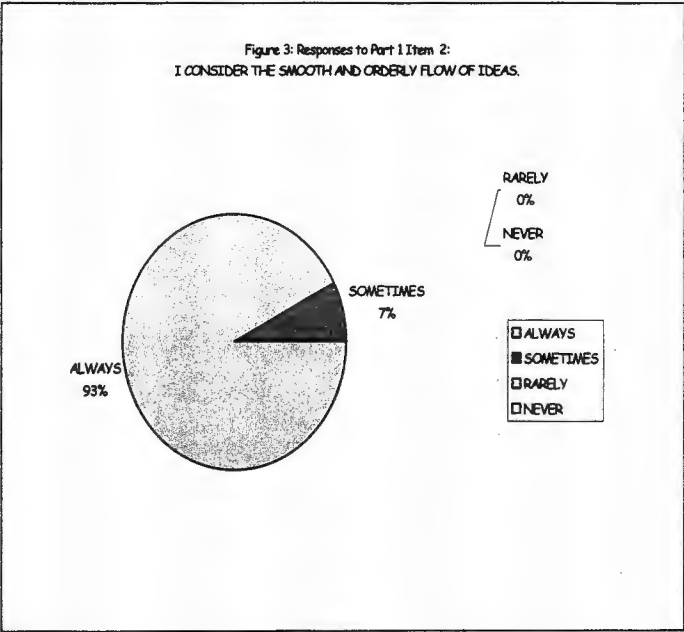- ■ LOYOLA SCHOOLS/ P.E.

In item 1 of the first part of the questionnaire, 92 percent of the respondents reported that they *always* gave weight to the quality of the student's ideas about his/her chosen subject; not one responded with *rarely* or *never*.
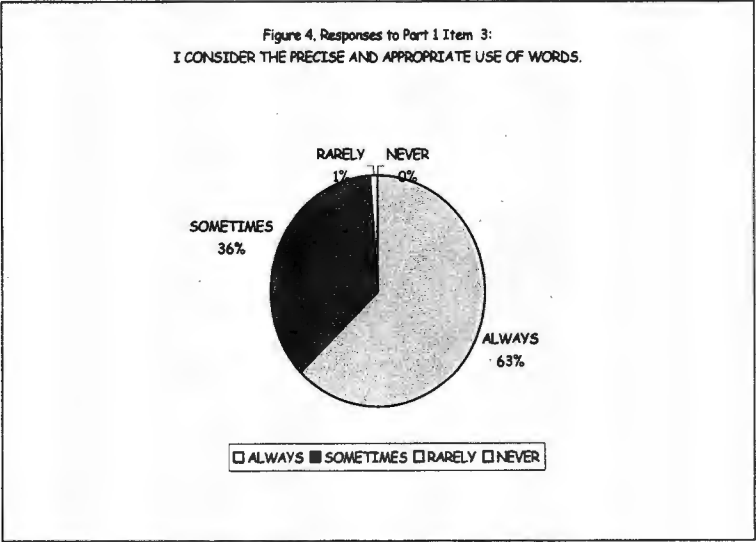

Figure 2. Responses to Part 1 Item 1:
I GIVE WEIGHT TO THE QUALITY OF THE STUDENT'S IDEAS ABOUT HIS/HER CHOSEN SUBJECT.

RARELY 0%
NEVER 0%
SOMETIMES 8%
ALWAYS 92%

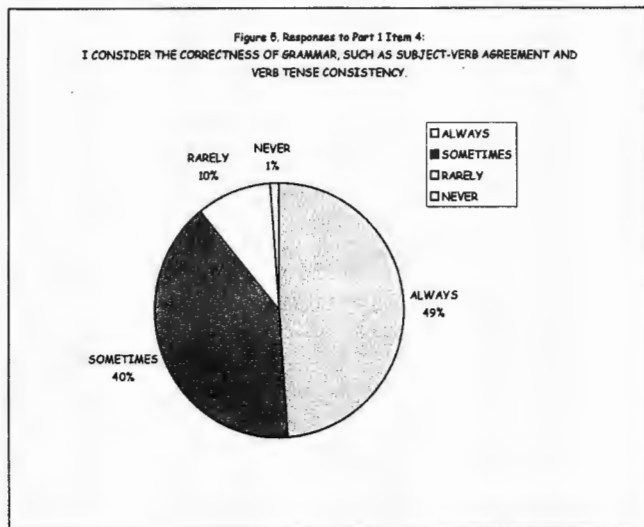□ ALWAYS ■ SOMETIMES □ RARELY □ NEVER

In the second item, a higher percentage of content-area teachers, 93 percent, *always* considered the smooth and orderly flow of ideas whenever they marked their students' written work; again, not one responded with *rarely* or *never*.

Figure 3: Responses to Part 1 Item 2:
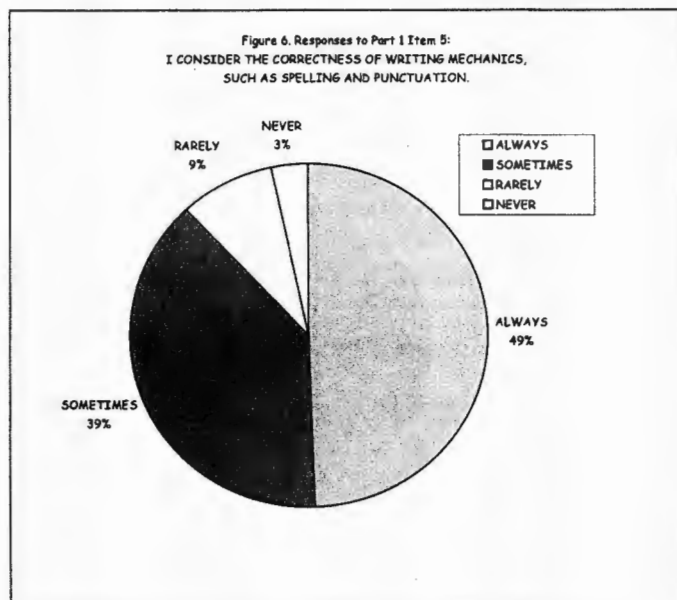I CONSIDER THE SMOOTH AND ORDERLY FLOW OF IDEAS.

As regards the extent to which content-area teachers consider the precise and appropriate use of words whenever they mark written work, 63 percent responded with *always*, 36 percent with *sometimes*, and 1 percent with *rarely*.

Figure 4. Responses to Part 1 Item 3:
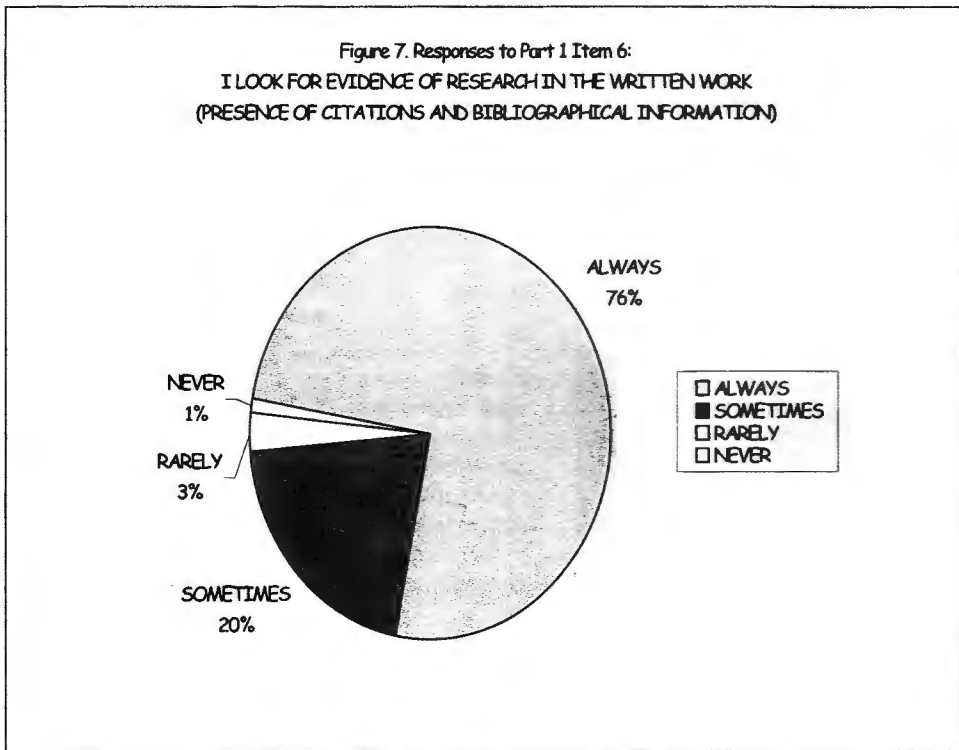I CONSIDER THE PRECISE AND APPROPRIATE USE OF WORDS.

Compared to item 3, fewer content-area teachers, about 49 percent, reported that they *always* considered the correctness of grammar in marking students' written work; 40 percent responded with *sometimes* and 10 per cent with *rarely*. On this item, although only a very small percentage, one percent responded with *never*.

Figure 5. Responses to Part 1 Item 4:
I CONSIDER THE CORRECTNESS OF GRAMMAR, SUCH AS SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT AND VERB TENSE CONSISTENCY.

RARELY 10% NEVER 1%

□ ALWAYS
■ SOMETIMES
□ RARELY
□ NEVER

ALWAYS 49%

SOMETIMES 40%

As for the content-area teachers' concern for writing mechanics, there seems to be a similar result in item 4. Again, only 49 percent reported that they *always* considered the correctness of writing mechanics whenever they marked written work; 39 percent responded with *sometimes*, nine percent with *rarely*. It is in this item where I found the largest percentage, about three percent, who responded with *never*.

Figure 6. Responses to Part 1 Item 5:
I CONSIDER THE CORRECTNESS OF WRITING MECHANICS, SUCH AS SPELLING AND PUNCTUATION.

NEVER 3%
RARELY 9%

□ ALWAYS
■ SOMETIMES
□ RARELY
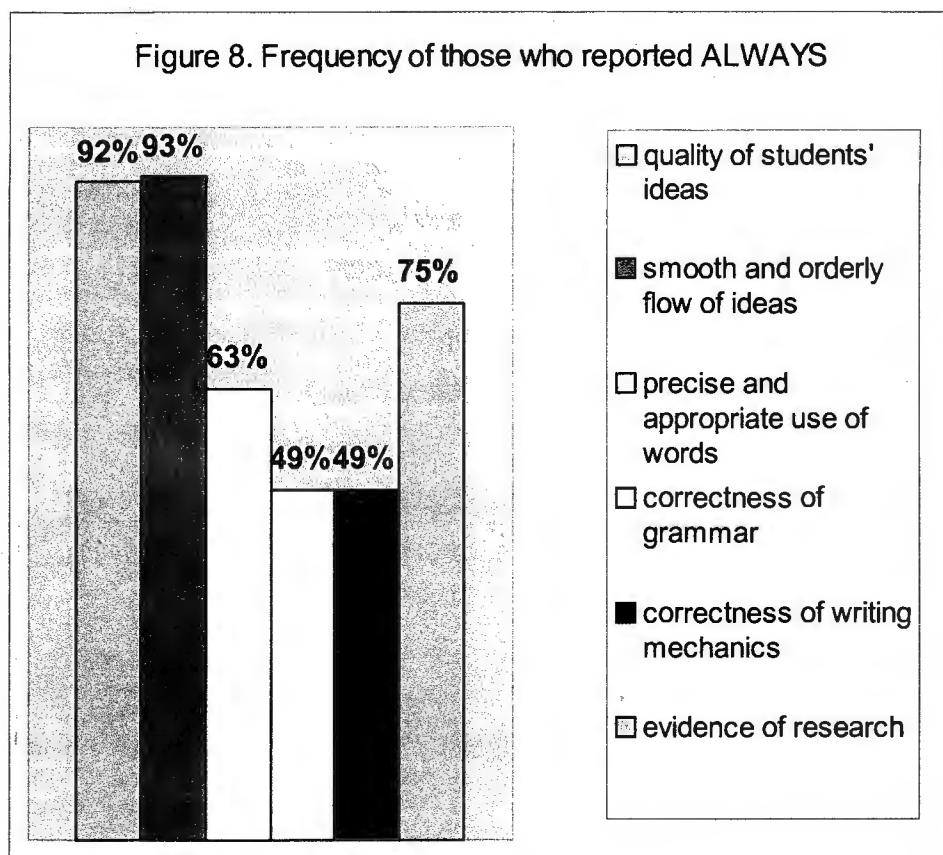□ NEVER

ALWAYS 49%

SOMETIMES 39%

In the last item of part 1 of the questionnaire, 76 percent reported that they *always* looked for evidence of research in their students' written work; 20 percent responded with *sometimes* and three percent with *rarely*.

Figure 7. Responses to Part 1 Item 6:
I LOOK FOR EVIDENCE OF RESEARCH IN THE WRITTEN WORK
(PRESENCE OF CITATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION)

ALWAYS
76%

NEVER
1%

RARELY
3%

SOMETIMES
20%

□ ALWAYS
■ SOMETIMES
□ RARELY
□ NEVER

The results of the survey reveal that most content-area teachers pay attention to (1) the quality of ideas in the written work, (2) the smooth and orderly flow of these ideas, (3) the precise and appropriate use of words, and (4) evidence of research in the written work. To some extent, content-area teachers also pay attention to the correctness of grammar and writing mechanics.

More specifically, a comparison of the frequency of those who reported ALWAYS in the six items in part 1 of the questionnaire reveals two trends in how content-area teachers mark their students' written work: (1) a large majority of the teachers *always* paid attention to the quality of the students' ideas, as well as to the smooth and orderly flow of ideas in the written work; on the other hand, (2) a smaller number, less than half of those surveyed, *always* paid attention to the correctness of grammar and writing mechanics.

Figure 8. Frequency of those who reported ALWAYS

- quality of students' ideas — 92%
- smooth and orderly flow of ideas — 93%
- precise and appropriate use of words — 63%
- correctness of grammar — 49%
- correctness of writing mechanics — 49%
- evidence of research — 75%

The results of the open-ended section in part 2 of the questionnaire support these conclusions. Although the respondents were asked to identify *other* criteria used in marking written work, most of the content-area teachers simply paraphrased the items in part 1 of the questionnaire:

- Since this is more or less a technical course, I look for ideas conveyed on the topic.
- I give more weight/a higher score to students whose ideas are unique/who think out of the box (I don't like students who just repeat what's in the book.)
- Lucid writing, writing economically, writing factually
- Use of technical words; simplicity/clarity
- Objective knowledge; factual content
- Articulation (precision and sensitivity to nuances of ideas)

- Insight (ability to go beyond facts, reflection, synthesis, personal application)
- My instructions for answering essay questions: Answer...clearly, concretely, and completely...
- Persuasiveness of the arguments; knowledge of the subject matter
- Organization, smooth flow of ideas, logical arguments
- Clarity of expression (always)
- Ability to exemplify the truth or principle discussed...its relevance
- Brief, condensed, to the point

3. DISCUSSION

That content-area teachers pay more attention to quality and flow of ideas in their students' written work and less to grammar and mechanics is quite expected. It is, after all, the task of an English Department as a service department to introduce to the students the linguistic tools they need to function effectively in an academic setting. This is precisely the reason why English language courses are freshman courses in the Loyola Schools. This is also the reason why the English Department requires about 20% of the freshmen to attend a six-unit bridging course (EN 10: Introduction to College English) before they qualify for the regular English language courses in the college (EN 11 and 12: Communication in English 1 and 2).

A first impulse, of course, given the results of the survey, is to conclude that the English Department should focus more on teaching writing accuracy because the content-area teachers take care of content anyway. However, writing teachers know that such a form-dominated approach, which was popular in the 1960s and 1970s (Raimes, 1993), ignores the complex process of writing. In addition, the development of writing accuracy alone does not translate into the development of good writing. Omaggio (1986) tells us that:

> Good writing in any language involves knowledge of the conventions of written discourse in that culture as well as the abilities to choose from near synonyms the precise word that conveys one's meaning, select from a variety of syntactic structures those that transmit one's message most precisely, and adopt a style that will have the most positive rhetorical effect. Obviously, such expertise will not develop merely from practice exercises in grammar and vocabulary at the sentence level.

Another first-impulse reaction to the results of the survey is to swing to the opposite extreme. Because content-area teachers do not give much weight to grammar and writing mechanics, English writing teachers in the Loyola Schools should ignore the form-dominated approach to teaching writing, and instead, focus on the creation of meaning in the written work. Such approach to teaching writing downplays accuracy, or at least, postpones it until the writer is able to produce ideas that are meaningful to him or her. Thus, the stress is on writing as a process of developing meaning. This process, however, can be a rather lengthy

and tiresome process that does not easily lend itself to the constraints of the classroom. In addition, ignoring writing accuracy altogether would certainly shortchange our students who are not first-language users of English and who need to be proficient in the language for various personal and professional needs.

What then would be the most appropriate approach to teaching writing given the needs of Ateneo de Manila students, as well as the content-area teachers who are also stakeholders in the success or failure of ELT in the Loyola Schools? Two other approaches may be seriously considered: the content-based approach and the audience-dominated approach (Raimes, 1993). These approaches are not mutually exclusive and seem to be more teacher-friendly than approaches that focus on simply form and process.

In the content-based approach, the writing teacher works very closely with the content-area teachers in situations of team teaching or course merging. The focus of teaching writing is English for specific academic purposes. A course on technical writing, for example, may be designed to merge two disciplines such as natural science and report writing. Thus, the approach calls for close collaboration between content-area and English language teachers. One downside of this approach, however, is the choice of content-area. Because our students are in mixed groupings in their freshman classes, who is to say that Computer Science is more important than Environmental Science, for example? In addition, a content-dominated approach requires some institutional arrangements that can be rather messy and therefore undesirable.

The audience-dominated approach, on the other hand, is concerned about writing that matches readers' expectations of academic discourse. Of course, the downside of this approach of teaching writing is that the readers must be clearly and accurately identified so that their expectations are met. And even if writing teachers are able to identify the target audience of their students' writing, to what extent are they capable of successfully predicting the expectations of these readers? The survey I conducted is an attempt to do just that - identify the expectations of the readers of our students. In this situation, however, an audience-dominated approach may not be helpful because the criteria for good writing identified by the content-area teachers are already the criteria used by writing teachers to evaluate their students' writing. In other words, the content-area teachers and English teachers in the Loyola Schools seem to have a consensus on what constitutes good writing.
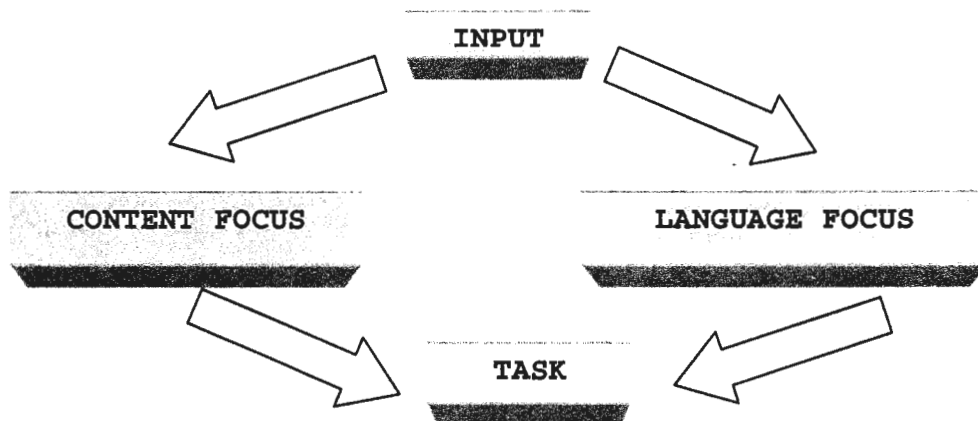
Rather than attend to form, the writing process, content, and audience as separate concerns in teaching writing, I propose an approach that balances all these and instead focuses on tasks. There is already an English language course in the general education curriculum of the school that takes a task-based approach to ELT. *Communication in English (CIE)*,[3] formerly referred to as *Communication Across the Curriculum*, aims to help our college students develop the English communication skills they need to cope with the academic demands of their courses. To be specific, students of CIE are expected to perform the following tasks:

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[3] Since the course was first introduced in 1998 (with the course title *Communication Across the Curriculum*), it has been reviewed almost every year, the last major revision being in January 2002.

CIE 1 (3 units)	CIE 2 (3 units)
Pre-task: write an expository essay	Write a review paper
Write a feature article	Write an issue-defense essay or problem-solution essay
Pre-task: develop critical thinking	Write a reflection paper
Write an argumentative research paper	

In CIE, students are evaluated according to how they performed in these tasks. By definition, a task already combines content knowledge and language skills. In a sense, then, a task merges the concerns of both content-area teacher and English language teacher. In more specific terms, a task is a final or culminating activity or project that results from comprehending and practicing language and content focused skills derived from life-like or real-world activities (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

Figure 9. Definition of a task

The course *Communication in English* provides students with opportunities to perform tasks expected in their content-area courses (such as history, sociology, psychology, natural science, literature, politics, economics, and many others). It is hoped that in the process of undertaking these tasks, students not only develop the language skills they need, they are also introduced to content relevant to the field of expertise they are striving to develop in college.

However, CIE does not stop at helping students cope with academic writing. A second look at the tasks required in CIE tells us that the course is not simply a service course

for other disciplines. The so-called "real world" activities students of CIE engage in transcend the boundaries of the Loyola Schools. Rather than keep our students confined within their academic experience, CIE in fact invites students to interrogate a world more real than the world of the Loyola Schools - it is a world fraught with marginal and often conflicting voices. It is the real world that our students are taught to be responsible for.

Thus, teaching writing in CIE is not simply a pedagogical act; it is also a political act that contributes to the vision of the university to form leaders for our country.

4. CONCLUSION

This survey about how content-area teachers in the Loyola Schools mark their students' written work leads me to some preliminary conclusions.[4] First, the content-area teachers and English teachers have similar notions about what constitute good writing. In other words, content-area teachers do not demand from their students a knowledge of the language specific to their disciplines (as in English for Computer Science or English for Math). Second, the task-based approach adopted by the English Department in 1998 through the course *Communication in English* is a step in the right direction.

Another observation I wish to hazard from this survey of the concerns of content-area teachers is an observation that transcends the bar graphs and pie charts earlier presented in this investigation. To some extent, I believe that content-area teachers want to take a more active part in the language education of their students. Some of these teachers who received my questionnaire gave me a call, sent me an e-mail message, or stopped me in the corridor to discuss their concerns about their students' writings. One teacher begged to be interviewed (which I plan to do for part 2 of the study); another inquired if I was interested in receiving copies of her students' work (to which I replied *yes*). In some sense, the simple act of participating in the survey made the content-area teachers more aware of their contributions to the language education of the students.

In a school setting, teaching a language need not be a lonely task. Content-area teachers need not be simply beneficiaries of English language teaching. As this study demonstrates, they may also become active partners of English language teachers.

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RAIMES, A. (1993). Out of the woods: Emerging traditions in the teaching of writing. In S. Silberstein (Ed.), *State of the art TESOL essays.* Washington, DC: TESOL.

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[4] I say "preliminary" because I intend to interview some content-area teachers who identified themselves in the questionnaire.