ARTICLE TITLE	FROM TEACHING TO PRODUCTION: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING WRITING IN THE FFL CLASSROOM
ARTICLE INFO	Souad Benabbes, Abderrazak Benzouai. (2025) From Teaching to Production: Strategies for Improving Writing in The FFL Classroom. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 1(45). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3233
DOI	https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3233
RECEIVED	25 December 2024
ACCEPTED	27 February 2025
PUBLISHED	04 March 2025
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FROM TEACHING TO PRODUCTION: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING WRITING IN THE FFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Writing plays a crucial role in secondary education, both as a communication tool and a means of learning, helping students assimilate content and become familiar with the writing requirements specific to each discipline. This study aims to assess writing teaching practices in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) classroom and identify teaching interventions to enhance learners' written output. Through a questionnaire, teachers shared their perceptions of their students' writing challenges and their strategies to address them. The analysis of the responses reveals a broad range of practices that focus on various stages of the writing process, with particular emphasis on revising texts.

Introduction

Writing plays a crucial role in secondary education, both as a communication tool and a means of learning, helping students assimilate content and become familiar with the writing requirements specific to each discipline. (Klein and Boscolo 2016). Writing proficiency is critical to academic, social, and professional success. However, for many foreign language learners, writing remains one of the most challenging skills to master (Fayol, 1990; Reuter, 2001; Bucheton, 2014). This difficulty stems from the complexity of the writing process, which involves careful reflection on the content to be communicated, mobilization of linguistic resources from memory, and, ultimately, the textual translation of this content.

To effectively guide learners toward mastering written expression, teacher feedback is essential. Teachers guide students through comments, suggestions, and direct corrections, helping them navigate the process of trial and error to produce a quality final product. Veslin and J. Veslin (1992) note that correcting written work, like any form of evaluation, challenges teachers and students. However, for feedback to be effective, teachers must create opportunities for students to engage with the feedback meaningfully—such as through revisions or creating a writing portfolio where learners analyze the feedback received. The key question is not whether to provide feedback but how to present it effectively, considering individual and contextual factors.

Prior knowledge activation is an essential approach enabling teachers to support French as a forging language students before they start writing. By offering them the opportunity to reflect on what they already know, this method promotes the integration of new information into existing cognitive structures, thus strengthening long-term memory (Watt-Taffe & Truscott, 2000).

Several studies on different writing interventions have identified effective practices both for learning to write (Graham & Perin, 2007) and for using writing as a learning tool (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004). Among

these practices, five instructional approaches have proven particularly effective for secondary school students: explicit writing strategy instruction, analysis of model texts, prewriting activities, collaborative writing, and the integration of authentic writing tasks (Friatin, 2018)

Writing strategy instruction is based on a clear and progressive teaching of techniques for planning, revising, and editing texts. By breaking down the writing process into smaller, more manageable steps, cognitive load is reduced while students' writing proficiency is enhanced. These strategies include both general methods, such as brainstorming, and genre-specific approaches, such as the structured steps for writing an argumentative text. Mnemonic devices help students remember the steps and key elements of a text (Topic sentence – main idea, Reasons – supporting points, explain each reason – elaboration, Ending – conclusion; Harris & Graham, 2009).

To achieve this, several strategies can be implemented, including the use of graphic organizers, cooperative learning, reading aloud and group discussions. Graphic organizers serve as visual tools that enable students to structure their knowledge in written or drawn form, thus facilitating the writing of informative or argumentative texts. This activity enables teachers to identify students' needs and adapt their teaching accordingly. This is where reading aloud, cooperative learning and group discussions come into their own.

This study investigates teachers' strategies to improve writing skills among Algerian learners in French as a foreign language classroom. Specifically, it examines the difficulties these learners encounter, as reported by their teachers, and explores the interventions and strategies teachers implement at various stages of the writing process.

1. Theoretical Framework
1.1. What is Writing?

Writing is a multi-faceted activity that requires mastery of various skills, including knowledge of language and its grammatical, spelling, and syntactic rules. It also involves the simultaneous engagement of several cognitive and motor functions.

The etymology of the word "write" traces back to the Latin "scribere," meaning "to scratch with a sharp object." Over time, this evolved into "escrive," then "escrire," and finally, the current form "écrire." To produce a text, the writer must navigate a series of constraints related to the language (orthographic, lexical, grammatical, or morphosyntactic) and those related to the textual and discursive genres anchored in well-established social and historical practices. Adam (1998) asserts, "Textual competence is based on multiple 'local' linguistic skills, which can be analyzed at the phrastic or interphrastic level. However, it is not limited to a mere sum of these local competencies, largely because all text is structured by non-linguistic elements, particularly those associated with underlying cognitive schemas" (p.138).

1.2. The Drafting Process

Hayes and Flower's (1980) cognitive model of the writing process remains a foundational reference. Developed in 1980, their model has become widely influential, particularly among teachers in the French-speaking world. The researchers conceptualized writing as a "problem situation," examining the processes writers employ to solve this problem. They conducted protocol analyses, recording what writers could articulate about their thoughts while developing a piece of writing. The participants in their study were students from Carnegie Mellon University.

In this model, the writing process is not a linear sequence of tasks but is characterized by constant feedback between tasks. The process is recursive: writers plan, write, and revise repeatedly throughout the writing process. Each subprocess can occur at any point and may be nested within others, managed by a control mechanism (Hayes & Flower, 1980, cited by Roussey & Piolat, 1992). As a result, cognitive mechanisms are not linear; instead, they engage the writer's cognitive skills, allowing for intervention at various stages of the writing process and modification as necessary.

1.3. Written Feedback

In an educational setting, feedback represents a teacher and learner dialogue. It provides information about the accuracy of a student's response and suggests areas for improvement, ultimately guiding the learner toward more excellent proficiency (Brown, 2007).

Feedback improves students' written production and enhances their self-confidence when engaged in writing tasks. When students have the option to consider feedback during revisions, they are more likely to feel involved in the writing process. Feedback can address both the content and the overall structure of the text

(macro level) and the quality of language (micro level). It may be "corrective," identifying areas for improvement or "positive," emphasizing strengths and guiding the learner toward the set objectives (Lee, 2008).

Corrective feedback can be direct, providing a solution, or indirect, pointing out an error without offering a solution. Direct feedback is particularly effective for correcting complex errors, while indirect feedback encourages learners to engage their knowledge to identify and correct their mistakes.

2. Methodology

To address the research question, we surveyed 30 french teachers in secondary education. The questionnaire, consisting of sixteen questions divided into four sections, gathered data on the demographic and professional profiles of the respondents (such as gender, age, educational qualifications, and years of experience). The survey also explored the difficulties students face in writing and the recommended methods for teaching writing. Key questions in the third section focused on the interventions teachers implement at various stages of the writing process (planning, drafting, and editing). The final section addressed strategies for improving writing, particularly in the digital age.

3. Results
3.1. Teachers' Relationship with Writing

The first research question focused on teachers' relationship with writing as well as their learning experiences. The responses indicated that teachers tended to view writing as a means of learning rather than merely a tool for transmitting expert knowledge.

For one of the teachers, writing is a mandatory practice in FFL teaching, but it is not literary in nature and is often linked to professional and administrative obligations. Her experience with learning to write was relatively effective in middle and high school. She believes that she did not do much writing in primary school: "In primary school, we focused much more on grammar and conjugation. However, in high school, we had to produce texts at the end of each didactic unit, covering different themes and classified into different genres," she explained. She added: "In high school, when I wrote in French, I often felt that I was better than my classmates; I didn't struggle much with vocabulary or conjugation. As a result, my writing was often selected as a model for others and displayed on the board, though with some modifications from the teacher."

3.2. Difficulties and contexts of writing activities

In question 5, teachers were asked to rank the causes of their students' difficulties in writing from most to least important. Based on the responses, 46% of the teachers indicated that dysfunctions from previous schooling and students' lack of confidence in engaging with writing were significant obstacles to effective written production in French as a foreign language. Teachers noted that many of their students Display a range of linguistic and discursive weaknesses that hinder their ability to write effectively in French. To address these issues, teachers must often reconstruct specific linguistic knowledge and writing techniques that should have been covered in earlier educational stages.

Moreover, 38% of the teachers surveyed attributed these writing difficulties to classroom overcrowding, which limits individualized attention to students and the ultimate focus on systematic instruction of French (i.e., syntax, lexicon, conjugation, and oral expression). As a result, high school students often feel a sense of helplessness when faced with writing assignments, as writing is the least mastered skill, even in their native Arabic language. Writing, therefore, becomes a particularly challenging task for these students.

Question 6 addressed whether teachers use digital or collaborative tools for teaching writing. Most (92%) teachers responded that they do not use such tools. The reasons cited included a lack of training and insufficient technological resources in their schools. Additionally, teachers noted that integrating digital tools into writing instruction, particularly for complex skills like writing, is difficult. These findings underscore the barriers to implementing technology in the classroom, especially in a writing-intensive discipline.

Regarding the types of texts that most motivate students, the responses from the teachers revealed that argumentative texts were considered the most engaging for students, followed by narrative texts. Descriptive and explanatory texts ranked lower in terms of student motivation. The appeal of argumentative texts is likely due to their emphasis on critical thinking, which encourages students to express their opinions. Narrative texts, with their imaginative or experiential nature, are similarly engaging for learners. In contrast, descriptive and explanatory texts are often perceived as less interactive and more informational, which might explain their lower level of student engagement. Despite this, the importance of these genres in structuring knowledge cannot be overlooked, and they are considered essential for comprehensive writing instruction.

Teachers believe that these difficulties may stem from a lack of reading and writing practice, ineffective teaching methods, and insufficient student motivation for writing. To address these issues, several measures can be considered, including continuous professional development to help teachers adopt more effective pedagogical strategies, increased integration of writing exercises in the classroom, and the use of various learning approaches to meet the specific needs of each learner.

3.3. Teachers' support

Teachers were asked at which stage of the writing process they preferred to intervene: planning, drafting, or revision. Analysis of the responses revealed that 50% of the teachers preferred to intervene during the revision stage, emphasizing the importance of feedback during this phase. Teachers believe that offering suggestions and corrections during revision allows students to thoroughly review and improve various aspects of their writing, both textually and formally. By providing feedback at this stage, teachers aim to guide students in evaluating their texts and refining their work.

In contrast, 22% of teachers preferred to intervene at the planning stage, offering guidance at the outset of the writing process. This intervention aims to help students better manage the overall progression of the writing activity. Teachers at this stage assist students in structuring their ideas and organizing their thoughts before the actual writing begins, which is considered a crucial part of the writing process.

A smaller percentage of teachers (19%) found it beneficial to intervene during the first draft stage, arguing that making corrections at this point allows them to address errors early in the writing process. Teachers explained that providing corrections during this stage helps students, especially those struggling with writing, recognize and correct their mistakes before progressing further with the drafting. The first draft stage provides an opportunity to support students who may not initially seek help but are guided through the correction process.

Finally, 10% of the teachers focused their interventions on the rewriting phase, which they viewed as a critical stage in determining the effectiveness of both teacher and student evaluation. Teachers noted that the rewriting phase helps students reconsider their approach to writing. Through this process, students see revisions, erasures, and changes as indicators of reflective thinking and Growth in writing maturity.

Regarding the specific focus of teacher interventions, 54% of the teachers reported that their feedback primarily addressed language-related issues, as they believe this will help students improve the overall quality of their text. According to the teachers, many students rush to submit their written work without revising it adequately. The teachers' feedback at this stage encourages students to reread their texts multiple times and develop a more critical approach to their writing.

Another 24% of the teachers focused their feedback on the central ideas of the text, helping students stay on topic and adhere to the writing instructions. These teachers felt it was essential to guide students early on to ensure the final text was relevant and appropriately structured.

The remaining 21% of teachers gave feedback on text elements, such as presentation, illustration, argumentation, and punctuation. These teachers emphasized that such aspects also played a crucial role in improving the overall quality of the writing, focusing not only on language mechanics but also on the organization and clarity of the content.

Almost half of the teachers (48%) considered it important for students to outline their texts before starting the writing activity. They argued that outlining is a cognitive operation that organizes the content to be communicated and promotes the development of writing skills. These teachers agree that teaching high school students to plan their writing, regardless of the text type, is essential for helping them select and organize relevant information.

Ten teachers (about 33%) said they presented a model outline to their students to guide them in structuring their texts. As non-native French writers, these teachers noted that students benefit from a clear example of organizing a text. By providing a model, teachers help students become more familiar with the process and reduce the likelihood of producing off-topic writing.

Approximately 25% of teachers emphasized analyzing and discussing ideas with students before writing. They believed that discussing the content and structure of the text with students provided valuable information that would engage their prior knowledge and enhance their ability to write effectively.

28% of teachers indicated they always required students to proofread and revise their first drafts. However, they noted that many students misunderstand the concept of revision. According to the teachers, students tend to focus solely on superficial changes, such as correcting spelling or adding or deleting words,

without realizing that revision can also involve restructuring entire sentences or paragraphs. This limited understanding of the revision process hinders the effectiveness of this stage in improving writing quality.

3.4. Use of model and authentic texts

Although the use of model and authentic texts is generally perceived as beneficial, the surveyed teachers highlight several challenges that complicate their integration into FFL classrooms.

The first obstacle mentioned concerns the level of difficulty of authentic texts, cited by 42% of teachers. These documents often contain rich vocabulary, complex syntactic structures, and cultural references that may be difficult for learners to understand, especially those at the beginner or intermediate level. This difficulty can lead to demotivation and a sense of failure if students do not receive adequate support to decode these texts

Another major challenge lies in the time required for the pedagogical exploitation of texts, reported by 30% of teachers. Unlike textbooks, which provide pre-structured activities, adapting authentic texts requires significant preparation: selecting the text, possibly simplifying it, developing guided questions, and designing progressive activities. This additional workload can be restrictive, especially in contexts where teachers must cover a dense curriculum within a limited time frame.

Finally, some teachers note students' resistance to long or complex texts. Certain learners, who are not accustomed to reading in French, may struggle to stay focused or to grasp the relevance of these exercises. In such cases, it is essential to propose adapted strategies, such as working in small groups, implementing interactive tasks, or using digital tools that facilitate text comprehension.

3.5. Strategies for effective teaching of writing

The survey responses revealed that 28% of teachers often teach students revision and rewriting strategies, particularly when revising written production. In the early years of learning, these strategies might focus on superficial aspects of writing, but as students' progress, the strategies become more complex and transformative. Teachers must reinforce these strategies and organize their teaching to engage students in writing activities that promote the full mobilization of writing processes, including planning, drafting, and revision.

34% of teachers proposed using self-assessment grids to guide students in the correction process. These tools are designed to help students become critical readers, leading to more effective revisions. Teachers believe that self-assessment grids help students focus on key aspects of the text and provide direction for meaningful improvements.

38% of teachers mentioned that they often provide direct corrections to students, particularly those who struggle with writing. This approach is intended to reduce students' anxiety about writing and help them develop confidence in their ability to revise and improve their work. Direct corrections are an essential part of the revision process, as they encourage students to take ownership of their writing and focus on improving their skills.

Finally, when asked which tools would most effectively improve writing skills, many teachers emphasized the value of writing workshops. These workshops provide structured guidance and allow students to build their writing skills gradually. Collaborative activities, such as pair or group writing, were also considered valuable, as they foster the exchange of ideas and promote the co-construction of texts. Teachers also highlighted the importance of using technology, including digital platforms and tools like spell checkers, to support learners in writing. Additionally, authentic or adapted model texts were considered adequate for helping students analyze and imitate high-quality written work, improving their writing style and vocabulary.

Conclusions

This research has identified key challenges students face in written production and highlighted the pedagogical strategies teachers use to improve students' writing skills. Students' difficulties are often linked to issues from previous educational experiences, lack of confidence in writing, and overcrowded classrooms. Teachers focus their interventions on the early stages of writing, particularly the planning phase, and emphasize the importance of revision.

Planning plays a crucial role in writing development, as it helps students organize their thoughts and structure their texts effectively. While many teachers prioritize revision, they also recognize the need to guide students through self-assessment occasionally to foster independent critical thinking.

In short, effective teaching of written expression in FFL relies on a combination of strategies adapted to the needs of learners. Teachers favor progressive approaches, ranging from direct correction to student autonomy through the use of self-assessment grids and guided revision. The integration of accompanied

writing workshops and collaborative activities enhances learner engagement while developing their writing skills. In addition, digital tools and the use of model texts appear to be essential levers for structuring learning and enriching written productions. These practices converge towards a common goal: to help learners appropriate the writing process in all its dimensions, from planning to rewriting, making it a genuine space for expression and progress.

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