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Memo to: June Youatt  
Assistant Provost and Dean, Undergraduate Studies

From: Pat Paulsell  
Associate Dean, College of Arts and Letters 

Re: Tier II Writing Requirement in modern foreign language programs

Date: February 21, 2006

This memo comes in response to a December 5, 2005 memo from Michael Schechter, Chairperson of the University Committee on Curriculum, to Ralph Putnam, Chairperson of the University Committee on Academic Policy referencing the "Tier II Writing Requirement in Modern Languages." The Schechter memo was copied to you and you forwarded it to me for a response.

As I indicated to you, I contacted the chairs of the language departments, Professors Marino (Spanish and Portuguese), Prestel (Linguistics and Languages) and Rauk (French, Classics, and Italian) to ascertain how they would like to proceed with a response. We decided that the three chairs would take the matter to the College Curriculum Committee and, in preparation for that meeting, I asked Professor Jim Porter (Special Advisor to the Dean on Writing, and member of the Writing Task Force that recently issued its report to the Provost) to provide us with a statement concerning the issue. We also asked Janet Swenson, Chair of the Task Force, for a statement. These statements, along with the memo from the chairs sent to UCAP on September 24, 2004, as well as the current CAL "College Specific Tier II Writing Criteria" were sent to the College Curriculum Committee as background materials for its meeting on February 16, 2005.

At that meeting, the Committee unanimously endorsed and supported the current practice of the modern language programs to require that the writing in Tier II Writing courses be in the target language. The Committee also unanimously supported amending the CAL "College Specific Tier II Writing Criteria" by replacing the word "English" in #5 with the word "writing." I have appended the amended document. This will address Michael Schechter's concern that "the modern language departments are not adhering to the College of Arts and Letters 'College Specific Writing Criteria.'"

Chairperson Schechter's remaining concern was the "interpretation of the Tier II Writing Requirement," in that both the Task Force and the Working Group to Improve Undergraduate Education did not address the issue of writing in languages



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other than English. The statements from Janet Swenson and Jim Porter are meant to address that remaining concern, and, I feel, should put the issue to rest.

It is clear in any event that the Curriculum Committee and the Dean's Office of the College of Arts and Letters strongly support the position of the modern language programs in requiring writing in the Tier II courses to be in the language of the discipline. Further, we accept Professor Porter's interpretation of University level statements about the Tier II writing requirement, i.e. that University guidelines have never specified that Tier II courses be taught in English and that "writing assignments are at the service of course content and the students' abilities to communicate it." Obviously, if the course content is all in the target language and an important part of acquiring disciplinary knowledge and skills is achieving higher levels of target language proficiency, then a Tier II Writing course that is based in the discipline must be taught in and require assignments completed in the target language.

I am, of course, at your disposal for any further discussions of this matter.

CC: Pat McConeghy, Dean  
Members of the College Curriculum Committee  
Nancy Marino, David Prestel, John Rauk, Chairs of language departments

STATEMENT REGARDING TIER II GUIDELINES AND TIER II WRITING COURSES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The College of Arts Letters document that establishes Tier II Writing Criteria lists the following guideline: "#5: Students must produce edited English that communicates effectively in their field before they receive a passing grade for the course." This guideline raises the question of whether Tier II courses in foreign languages (e.g., French, German, Russian, etc. -- see list below\*) are required to assign writing in English -- or whether it is understood that student writing assignments can be done in the language in which the course is being taught.

There is strong historical and documentary precedent for viewing the Tier II writing requirement as precisely that -- a writing requirement, not a writing-in-English requirement -- and for allowing writing in Tier II foreign language courses to be assigned in that foreign language.

(1) The Tier II Writing Requirement as expressed on p. 14 of the Academic Handbook (under "Graduation Requirements") does not specify that Tier II courses must be taught in English.

(2) The Joint Committee that issued the "Report of the Joint Committee on Writing Requirements" (1991) did not specify that Tier II courses needed to be taught in English or needed to require writing assignments to be produced in English. In fact, the report specifies that "writing assignments are at the service of course content and the students' abilities to communicate it" (p. 6). If anything, the view of the Joint Committee is that disciplinary specialists should decide on the writing requirements within specific fields and majors.

(3) The memo to Deans from Gerald Ludden and Barbara Steidle (September 26, 1997), establishing the implementation policy for the Tier II Writing Requirement, does not specify that Tier II courses must be taught in English (nor does it make any mention of "edited English").

(4) Although the Writing Task Force did not specifically address this question in its Final Report (November 22, 2004), it was the clear intention of the Writing Task Force to support cultural and global diversity in the undergraduate writing curriculum, a goal that would be enhanced by having Tier II writing courses taught in foreign languages: "Our students must develop ... an understanding of their own and others' cultural vantage points in a global context" (p. 18).

\* Courses include:

GRM - GRM 420, 435, 445 or 455

RUS - RUS 440 or 441  
FRN - FRN 320 or 340  
SPN - SPN 320 & 350  
East Asian Languages - ASN 401-464

Respectfully submitted,  
James E. Porter, Professor, WRAC  
Special Adviser on Writing, College of Arts & Letters

Pat,  
Jim Porter has kept us informed of your interest in gathering data on the liabilities and benefits of asking Tier II students who are foreign language majors to write in the target language rather than English. Jim has done a wonderful job of culling a number of statements from relevant reports that question whether the intent was ever to mandate writing in English. My own reading of these reports is that the intent was to improve the thinking and communication skill of students--in any language.

I thought you might also be interested in recent research that relates to the impact of L2 writing on L1 writing. Although it is possible to find mixed research results, the following summary by the APEF's (French Second Language Curriculum Directors) seems to encapsulate other research conclusions:

"The effect of learning a second language (e.g. French) on first language skills has been virtually positive in all studies. Although most studies on the effect of second language learning on first language literacy have been done in the area of French immersion education, one can also apply the findings to Core French and intensive French programmes.

The loss of instructional time in English in favour of the second language has never been shown to have negative effects on the achievement of the first language. Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, which maintains that language skills are being transferred from one language to the other, can be assumed to be true for the core French situation as well. One can confidently assume that cognitive abilities acquired in the learning of one language can be put to use in the acquisition and proficiency of the other language. In many studies first language skills were shown to be enhanced, even if instruction time in L1 was reduced in favour of L2 instruction."

<http://www.caslt.org/research/executivesum.htm>, 1/10/06.

One could question whether those commissioning the study had a vested interest in the outcome, but since the study represents a meta-analysis of many research studies, that doesn't appear to be the case. I wish I were better versed in this area, but did want to draw this study to your attention.

Best regards,  
Janet

September 24, 2004

To: University Committee on Academic Policy

From: Nancy Marino, Chair, Spanish and Portuguese; David Prestel, Chair, Linguistics and Germanic, Slavic, Asian and African languages; John Rauk, Chair, Classics, French and Italian

Subject: Tier II Writing Requirement in Modern Languages

As chairs of the MSU language departments we are writing to request recognition by UCAP that it has been the practice for the past 13 years, since institution of the Tier II Writing Requirement, to teach the Tier II Writing courses in the target language of each program. When the decisions were made by the units regarding designation of Tier II Writing status to courses, the directive from the University was to provide experience for students in writing in the discipline. The Report of the Joint Committee on Writing Requirements (1990) states that after completing the Tier II requirement, "Students should have received instruction and practice in the tasks, forms and styles of writing appropriate to their discipline or profession" (p. 7). Unfortunately, because the standards of the fields of French, Spanish, German, and Russian consist of being able to write in edited French, Spanish German, and Russian, this is in conflict with another stated purpose of the Tier II requirement that students learn "edited English appropriate to the standards of the disciplinary and professional programs in which they are enrolled" (p. 7). Given this inconsistency in the requirements with respect to foreign languages, as well as in our interpretation of them, we are requesting that, for the present, UCAP recognize the current status and acknowledge the interpretation of the language departments of the Tier II Writing mandate---and particularly its spirit of writing in the discipline---pending the recommendations of the current Tier II Writing Task Force.

As an appendix to our request we note the following points in support of our contention that in order to be able to write an academic paper in the second language (L2), students need to write in the L2 in their classes, and not in English.

- Learning to speak an L2 does not translate into being able to write well in an L2. Just as those who speak English cannot necessarily write academic English well, those who can speak an L2 need to learn the *written* discourse of the L2. This is particularly true for heritage learners who are often conversationally fluent but lack academic literacy skills in foreign language.
- The written modality is an additional form of language output (i.e., production). It is now widely agreed that learners need more than input (i.e., exposure) to be able to speak and write well in an L2. When writing, students have time to stop

and focus on the form of their language (i.e., grammar and vocabulary) as opposed to just the meaning. If students only speak in the L2 and don't write, they will never perfect their written discourse to the level needed to be able to write in their discipline.

- Written output from the students gives instructors additional opportunities to assess learners' language. Writing in the L2 about the course content gives instructors an opportunity to draw learners' attention to their language problems. This attention is necessary for learners to progress in terms of their grammar and vocabulary.
- Learning to write academic English does not ensure that students will learn to write academic discourse in the L2. Writing is a learned behavior whose conventions have to be specifically taught and whose conventions are culturally specific.
- Asking students to write in English in Tier II foreign language classes would be detrimental to learning. It is essential that 400-level language classes be taught in the L2. Students need to be immersed in the L2 and class discussions and content, including readings and videos, need to be in the L2. Although improving general the overall language skills of foreign language majors, as opposed to only writing skills, is not a goal of the Tier II requirement, it is a worthwhile one.

**COLLEGE OF ARTS & LETTERS**  
**College Specific Tier II Writing Criteria**

The College of Arts and Letters issued the following Tier II guidelines to the Departments, Schools and Programs that offer undergraduate degrees.

1. Writing tasks are integrated into the learning of the subject matter of the course and the quality of the student's ability to engage in written intellectual discourse about their discipline is a factor in awarding the grade for the course.
2. Writing assigned during the course will consist of several different writing tasks.
3. Students must present at least one paper that demonstrates their mastery of the forms, citation and documentation conventions of the particular field of inquiry of expertise in which they are majoring.
4. The instructor will evaluate and the student must revise at least one paper before a final grade is awarded.
5. Students must produce edited writing that communicates effectively in their field before they receive a passing grade for the course.

Statement approved as amended by  
College of Arts and Letters Curriculum Committee  
2/16/06

PRP/06