ESL/EFL Instructors’ Practices for Writing Assessment: 
Specific or General Purposes?

Alister Cumming, University of Toronto

Address for correspondence: Alister Cumming, Modern Language Centre, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1V6; E-mail: acumming@oise.utoronto.ca Fax: 1-416-926-4769.

Author’s note: I thank Liz Hamp-Lyons, Tom Lumley, Merrill Swain, and 16 of the interviewees for commenting usefully on an initial draft of this article.

A fundamental difference between specific and general purposes for language assessment emerged from analyses of 48 highly experienced instructors of ESL/EFL composition’s accounts, during interviews, of their usual practices for writing assessment in courses in universities or immigrant settlement programs. The instructors worked in situations where English is either the majority language (Australia, Canada, New Zealand) or an international language (Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand). Although the instructors tended to conceptualize ESL/EFL writing instruction in common ways overall, distinctions prevailed in their conceptualizations of student assessment, depending on whether the courses they taught were defined in reference to general or specific purposes for learning English. Conceptualizing ESL/EFL writing for specific purposes (e.g., in reference to particular academic disciplines or employment domains) provided clear rationales for selecting tasks for assessment and specifying standards for achievement; but these situations tended to use limited forms of assessment, based on limited criteria for student achievement. Conceptualizing ESL/EFL writing for general purposes, either for academic studies or settlement in an English-dominant country, was associated with varied methods and broad-based criteria for assessing achievement, focused on individual learners’ development, but realized in differing ways by different instructors.
I Introduction

While on sabbatical leave in 1999 I set out to visit a variety of countries and institutions where I knew composition was commonly taught to adult learners of English. In addition to wanting to document, and learn from, the pedagogical conceptualizations of a variety of highly experienced instructors of composition, I designed a research study that I hoped might uncover the nature of differences, across certain types of educational contexts, in practices for curriculum organization, instruction, and student assessment. One dimension I designed the research sample to contrast was situations where (a) English is a foreign language (EFL, i.e., not commonly spoken in local communities) or (b) English is a second language (ESL, i.e., spoken widely in local communities, as in immigrant settlement contexts) (for definitions, see Stern, 1983, pp. 9-18; and for examples see Dickson and Cumming, 1996). The second dimension I designed the research to contrast was between teaching in (a) academic settings, such as university programs, or (b) immigrant settlement programs in countries where English is the majority language (see, e.g., Eggington and Wren, 1997; Herriman and Burnaby, 1996). A detailed account of the curriculum and instructional aspects of the data appears in Cumming (In press), whereas the present article focuses on issues of student assessment.

To my surprise, I found scarcely any differences across these two dimensions of educational contexts. Seemingly, the highly experienced instructors I interviewed had been so influenced by research and theory on writing, post-graduate education, and professional networks and publications that they expressed fundamentally similar conceptualizations of the organization of writing curricula, instructional practices, and student learning activities. Instead of differences in regional contexts or program types, I found differences according to whether curriculum contexts defined English writing either for specific or for general purposes. This distinction was especially prominent in respect to the methods of assessment the instructors said they utilized and the types of achievements in English writing they perceived their students to make.

The perspective taken in this paper differs from that usually adopted in studies of languages for specific purposes (LSP), as recently reviewed in Douglas (2000) or Swales (2000), or as critiqued in Widdowson (1983). Most studies of LSP have analyzed discourse in a specific
domain as a basis for designing language curricula or assessment instruments relevant to
learners’ long-term goals for using a language in the specific domain. In contrast, I designed the
present research to document and analyze the practical pedagogical knowledge of people who
are highly experienced in one aspect of language instruction, teaching ESL or EFL written
composition. The distinction between specific and general purposes for instruction and
assessment then emerged, unexpectedly, as a finding from this investigation. I wanted to know
what experienced instructors say they do in their actual educational practices. This theoretical
orientation follows from studies of teacher knowledge in educational research (e.g., Connelly
and Clandinin, 1988; Clark and Peterson, 1986). Numerous researchers have recently begun to
pursue this orientation in second and foreign language education, for example, as means of
understanding or guiding teachers’ professional development (e.g., Johnson, 1999) or curriculum
change (e.g., Burns and Hood, 1995), including studies of ESL writing instruction (e.g., Shi and
Cumming, 1995; Tong, 2000). Documenting how experienced teachers conceptualize their
thinking about ESL/EFL writing instruction is a necessary step toward developing empirical
models of second-language writing instruction that do justice to the full nature of this
phenomenon (as argued in Cumming, 1998; Cumming and Riazi, 2000). I presumed that
approaching these issues through a comparative, international study would help to supplement
and expand upon the intensive case study approach that such inquiry necessarily has to adopt
(because of its focus on individual instructors’ knowledge), while providing information of a
more meaningful, situated kind than is available through brief responses to questionnaire
surveys. In sum, my interests were in analyzing what experienced instructors say they do when
they teach ESL/EFL writing. The notion of LSP emerged as an element integral to this
pedagogical knowledge, demarcating it conceptually, particularly in respect to notions of student
assessment, across a broad range of educational contexts.

II Research design and analyses

I selected 6 countries for the research: 3 countries where English is the dominant
language (Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) and 3 countries or states where English is an
international language, that is, studied in higher education and used in business but seldom
spoken in local communities or homes (Japan, Hong Kong, and Thailand). Within each country, I aimed to contact a purposive sample of highly experienced ESL/EFL writing instructors in at least two major universities in two different, major cities in each country. In addition, for the English-dominant countries, I also aimed to contact several highly experienced ESL/EFL writing instructors teaching in nation-wide immigrant settlement programs. (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have similar, national-level programs for ESL instruction for adult immigrants.) This sampling was selective and purposive, focused on instructors with high levels of expertise in each setting, rather than aiming to be representative of educators in the particular countries or institutions. I sent e-mail messages to heads of departments related to ESL/EFL education in 2 or 3 universities in each country and 1 immigrant settlement program in the English-dominant countries, asking them to nominate 2 or 3 instructors with extensive experience teaching ESL/EFL writing and distinctive local or international reputations. I promised full confidentiality of the interviewees and the institutions.

Table 1  Contexts of the 48 interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English is the Majority Language</th>
<th>English is an International Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Settlement Programs</td>
<td>Academic Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand (6)</td>
<td>New Zealand (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia (3)</td>
<td>Australia (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada (Ont.) (3)</td>
<td>Canada (Ont.) (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japan (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada (Que.) (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Interviews</td>
<td>19 Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17 Interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Table 1 shows, I conducted 48 interviews of 1 to 1.5 hours duration over a period of 8 months in 1999: 31 interviews were in situations where English is the majority language and 17 were in situations where English is an international language. Nineteen of the interviews in English-dominant countries were in academically oriented programs in university departments, whereas 12 were at institutions (such as private or government agencies or continuing education programs in school boards) offering immigrant settlement programs. All of the interviewees appeared to be highly experienced and accomplished instructors of ESL/EFL writing, each with acknowledged reputations among their colleagues for their expertise in this area. All had relevant post-graduate degrees and most were authors of research articles, curricula, or textbooks on ESL/EFL writing; about one-third had widely-cited publications and international reputations on this topic. I posed each person, in advance of the interviews, 3 open-ended questions: (a) How is the curriculum for ESL or EFL writing organized in your institution? (b) Could you describe a typical syllabus for an ESL or EFL writing course at your institution? Please select one course that you usually teach. (c) How are students typically assessed in their ESL or EFL writing? During the first interview, I devised an additional follow-up question, inquiring about the achievements the instructors perceived their students making in ESL or EFL writing, which I asked all subsequent interviewees. I requested course outlines and other samples of instructional material from each person, took detailed stenographic-type notes during the interviews, and audio-recorded the interviews then later personally reviewed and selectively transcribed all of the tapes.

For analyses, I used an emergent, constant-comparative method of grounded interpretation, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and other qualitative researchers. For the present analysis, after 5 reviews of the full data set and quotations grouped into categories, and after observing a fundamental difference between contexts where ESL/EFL writing was defined as having either specific or general purposes, I posed 2 research questions to guide the analyses: (a) Under what conditions do instructors say they tend to adopt a specific-purpose orientation or a general-purpose orientation to ESL/EFL writing instruction? (b) What consequences might this distinction have on the instructors’ practices for writing assessment and on their perceptions of their students’ achievements?
III Curriculum conditions for specific-purpose or general-purpose writing instruction

1 Specific purposes

Among the 48 interviewees, 11 instructors described ESL/EFL writing courses that had distinctly specific-purpose orientations, defined in reference to their students’ long-term academic or career domains. For example, this orientation was prominent at one university in Hong Kong:

The courses are tailored to needs. They are mostly aimed at a particular faculty, for example, Engineering, Dentistry, or Law. The needs are assessed systematically through surveys and updated. (Hong Kong)

A comparable logic guided the provision of writing instruction in some ESL settlement programs as well, focused on literate tasks for work-related purposes:

We are contracted by an employment center to train new migrants with good tertiary qualifications and professional experience but who lack English proficiency, are unfamiliar with the context, and don’t know about the employment situation here. Writing is only part of the curriculum. It is largely workplace texts, such as recounts of an accident, workplace memos, letters of applications, or written reports. (New Zealand)

Similar reasoning appeared as well in English-dominant contexts, as in this description of ESL writing courses for Engineering students:

All Engineering students have either completed high school in Canada or written the TOEFL or IELTS to enter the university. Then they have to do an in-house placement writing test that involves summarizing a reading and writing an essay on a related topic in half an hour. On the basis of this, students are placed in different writing courses. There are 3 levels at the first year of university. The technical writing course is for the mid-range students with ESL backgrounds. (Canada)
Among the other 37 interviewees, three rationales were commonly cited for conceptualizing EFL/ESL writing instruction in general, rather than specific, terms. The first rationale presumed a general deficit among certain students, particularly those who had not previously studied writing in English or, in some instances, in their mother tongues either. Students were perceived to need a general introduction to basic aspects of English writing and practice doing it:

English is not compulsory in school, but it is often required. Writing is not emphasized, or even taught at all. So some students at university have not written at all. So this is a major problem at the university level. And the entrance examination is reading, vocabulary and grammar--no writing, speaking or listening. (Thailand)

Alternatively, some interviewees justified their adopting a general-purpose orientation on the basis of the sheer diversity of characteristics, needs, or literate abilities among their students, making it seem impossible to provide writing instruction that caters to specific goals. In many of these situations, however, the idea of academic purposes provided an orientation that was intermediary between specific-purpose and general-purpose orientations:

We have a great range of students in the courses, from post-graduates, to recent immigrants wanting particular qualifications, to those with less definite purposes, and to people on scholarships from other countries, for example, sponsored by their governments. (New Zealand)

The third rationale for general-purpose orientations arose with a few instructors who said they organized their ESL/EFL writing instruction around topics derived from the interests of the students themselves, rather than being defined a priori by a prescribed syllabus. This constructivist view of syllabus planning spanned immigrant settlement programs and academic programs and ESL and EFL contexts alike, but it was often framed in reference to issues of
Writing emerges from topics of interest in class. The students are not looking for jobs or university entrance. They want to know about Canadian society, values, and current events. So the writing is organized around these interests. Writing is an extension of topics of relevance to students. (Canada)

In sum, instructors who taught ESL/EFL composition for general purposes rationalized their curriculum orientation in reference to characteristics of their students (who may not previously have studied writing formally, so now needed to, or who were collectively so diverse in their needs for learning that only a general approach to writing instruction could accommodate the variety of these needs in a classroom) or from their preference to define the content of their teaching in respect to the ongoing or emerging interests of their students. In contrast, instructors who taught ESL/EFL composition for specific purposes rationalized their curriculum orientation in reference to features of the discourse required in the long-term academic or career goals that their students would, in the future, be pursuing. These distinctions represent extremes of a continuum, however, as many of the instructors, particularly those working in university contexts, expressed predilections toward an intermediate category of “academic purposes” (which I have grouped in with general purposes here, as it was seldom specified in concrete, linguistic or conceptual terms, as were specific purposes). In practice, considerable overlap exists between the two extremes of specific and general-purpose orientations, which represent tendencies rather than absolute categorical distinctions.

IV Functions of assessment

Collectively, the interviewees described three basic functions of assessment in their writing courses: (a) initial assessment, prior to courses beginning; (b) ongoing, formative assessment in relation to writing tasks; and (c) assessing students’ achievements during or upon completion of a course. These assessment functions took a somewhat different realization for courses having either specific or general purposes, as the following examples indicate.
1 Initial assessment

Initial assessment was seldom mentioned in reference to specific-purpose writing courses, except for functions of grouping students into classes (e.g., as described above by the Canadian instructor of Engineering students). Seemingly, students’ enrolment in a particular academic field or type of program defined a priori their needs for a specific-purpose ESL/EFL writing course, so decisions about placement, needs, or diagnosis were made generally on the basis of program policies, and seldom at the level of individual students in starting new programs. In contrast, in discussing general-purpose writing courses, many interviewees described procedures for initially assessing students’ writing abilities for the purposes of selecting or placing students into appropriate courses, diagnosis to inform teaching or course design, or counseling students on program options. These functions were emphasized particularly in large-scale ESL programs catering to diverse populations of adult learners, which inevitably took a general-purpose orientation, focused on personalized assessment of individual students’ learning needs, development, or competencies (rather than arising from predictions about the discourse expectations of their future work):

I work now as an assessor. The students come in individually, and we talk for 10 minutes. Then they do some writing for 5 to 25 minutes, depending on their proficiency level. Then I counsel them on where they should go--I can’t force them anywhere--based on the results and the students’ wishes. This is really just placement advice. The teachers get an indication of the students’ level for speaking and writing, but no diagnostic information. (general-purpose, settlement course, Canada)

2 Formative assessment

Most accounts of assessment during the interviews focused on ongoing, formative assessment of students’ writing and the grading of it. In specific-purpose and general-purpose courses alike, instructors tended to emphasize the realism and value of the tasks selected for writing as well as the importance of assessment adhering to standards, for example:
The mid-term is worth 30%, the final exam is 30%, and their class work is 30%. Their written papers for these follow the same materials as the material they study and practice writing: to fill in forms, to make job applications, to write resumes, do interviews, which they need practice in and techniques, and they take notes from phone conversations. Two or 3 markers evaluate the papers, to check for bias, under 5 categories: grammar, content, organization, format, and impressions. (specific-purpose course for teachers, Thailand)

Students’ grades in their university courses are based on their writing, especially essay types of writing. So in this course we are preparing students for the skills they need: to quickly analyze problems, prepare and support an argument, to write a thesis, paragraphs, structuring essays around points, supporting each, the skill of bringing adequate material into an essay in a scholarly way (to avoid plagiarism, at least informally), and to give the function of an essay a positive slant. (general-purpose, academic course, Canada)

Similarly, many instructors described intricate ways of integrating assessment with writing curricula. This concern appeared particularly in general-purpose course, where instructors focused intently on the individual development of students (compared to specific-purpose courses):

Assessment is consciously integrated with the syllabus. Early in a course, assessment is diagnostic and for placement. But as people progress, the purpose of assessment is to make sure teachers are assessing what they are teaching and the students are learning. There are benchmark texts and tasks with minimum standards that students should attain. Teachers often give students the performance criteria so students can monitor their own progress. Then range statements are evidence guides, based on several years of research about this. Teachers design assessment tasks that reflect what is taught and what learners need to learn. The assessment should fit into the learning context. They shouldn’t notice the bump when they get to assessment. (general-purpose, settlement course, Australia) Writing assessment is mostly formative. Teachers here don’t like numbers. It is a two-stage process. On the first draft, I do no writing or editing. I just read and try to
understand, see how well it is organized, developed, the amount of information, and the accuracy. The content is very important. The big comments I make are for revisions. Then the student works on it again, then has a peer review, paired with a student with comparable problems. Then after it is revised, the second stage is editing. Common mistakes I take up in class. I focus on different levels. It is an individualized process, focused on problems, but aiming to get students to self-edit in the future. I make suggestions to improve the draft, even if it is well written. Maybe I suggest some homework exercises. (general-purpose, academic course, Canada)

We look at a model, for example an argumentative essay, and critique it in terms of how it is organized and the language used. The class brainstorms on this, does planning, group feedback, maps out the structure, then students write the first draft, then refine the draft in light of teacher feedback, building up awareness of things to look out for. This is made into a checklist of things, an editing checklist, such as remedial grammar. We use it by matching students in threes to comment and do peer reviews and critiques. This requires training and practice. I give detailed feedback to each student, particularly on their first drafts, and we make a comprehensive identification of their errors. Then the students are required to check for frequent problems, such as words misspelt, grammar. All depends on where students are at already, and where they need to move to next. (general-purpose, academic course, New Zealand)

This personalized focus on individual students seemed to prompt instructors to use formative assessment as a basis for record-keeping (in reference to individual students) and instructional planning (in reference to groups of students), particularly in general-purpose courses. This tendency was seldom cited in discussions of specific-purpose courses, where results from prior needs analyses or program policies appeared to define curriculum content and initial entry requirements in linguistic or rhetorical, rather than personal, terms. For example, in general-purpose courses:

I keep marks to remind myself about the individual students, for example, if they are
using appropriate vocabulary, grammar, organization, if they got the message across. I keep this in a book for myself in planning my teaching and to see if they make progress along the way. (general-purpose, settlement course, Canada)

For feedback on their essays, I respond to their ideas, not correct them. There are some common problems among the students, for example, no grasp of paragraph structure, they don’t know how to support their ideas, they copy a lot, and have problems with certain lexical items. I discuss these and give examples about them in class. (general-purpose, academic course, Japan)

Methods described for the formative assessment of writing varied considerably from interviewee to interviewee for both general and specific-purpose courses. For instance, views on and practices for written feedback and error identification contrasted sharply among the instructors, as shown from these quotations from just Canada and New Zealand:

They want feedback. I try to accentuate the positive. Some students monitor their errors and keep lists of them. But most correction doesn’t seem to have an effect, except to convey the message that their language is inadequate, which they know already. So I focus comments on areas where comprehension is an issue. I make the issue one of clarity, not rightness or wrongness. (general-purpose, academic course, Canada)

I do tons of marking. I make extensive written responses to their writing, showing them what to edit for. I underline every error and code it for them to correct. They need that feedback, and they don’t want to have an imperfect product. I also give them feedback on organization and what meaning their writing conveys. (general-purpose, settlement course, Canada)

We start formative assessment right from the beginning. I code when marking formally, using error symbols, so students can think about their problems. For surface errors I underline things. I try not to get them too carried away with them, though. The content, organization and ideas are more important. (general-purpose, settlement course, New
They do peer response, revisions, then the tutor comments on the draft, they revise it again, then they put it into their portfolio. This is not graded, unless someone requests that. The portfolio is marked at the end under 5 rubrics: content, organization, language use, style, and mechanics. (general-purpose, academic course, New Zealand)

3 Assessing achievement

For the pedagogical function of assessing students’ achievement, distinctive differences appeared between specific-purpose and general-purpose orientations. Specific-purpose courses defined their standards for achievement in their own terms, deriving from prior needs analyses and the constructs guiding the syllabi:

We do competency-based assessment. Analyses of register and appropriateness define the task and give the criteria. If the student achieves the task, then they are certified for having done it. If it is not achieved or only partly achieved, they resubmit it. The criteria for these really open up their eyes and broaden their perspectives on what makes for good writing. (specific-purpose, settlement course, New Zealand)

They do a simple project, first design it, second create a questionnaire, third collect data and analyze it, fourth make an oral presentation, then produce a written report. At the end of the course they present the final report, and it is marked when completed, which forces them to see it as a whole. I provide a list of criteria that are assigned holistically, not discretely. The university administration has added a level to this by asking us “to demonstrate gain”. So we administer a pre-course test where they write in 1 hour the missing section of a report. Then we compare this with the final report they write, using a list of criteria, linked to the syllabus of the course, so we can score discrete achievement from 1 to 5 from start to end. (specific-purpose, academic course, Hong Kong)
In contrast, a variety of different methods were described for assessing achievement in general-purpose courses: proficiency tests, rating scales, examinations, grading tasks, and portfolios. The diversity of these methods from place to place and institution to institution was striking.

_Proficiency tests_ featured in some general-purpose programs:

We recently added writing and speaking as part of the proficiency test battery, which has involved listening and reading. The purpose of the test is an empirical basis to report to government offices which students require additional support in English and how well students might cope with academic studies in the future in New Zealand. It is designed as a proficiency test, not related directly to the curriculum in any courses, but hopefully related indirectly, nor to specialized needs in any academic area. (New Zealand)

All the people working on the EAP program are trained as IELTS examiners. 6.5 on IELTS is required for university entrance for most programs. Our exams are like IELTS but not the same. Two teachers do all the subjective marking then average the scores. (Australia)

_Rating scales or competency assessments_ featured in other general-purpose programs:

For assessment, I use Jacobs et al.’s ESL Composition Profile. The students couldn’t understand the descriptors, so I translated it into Japanese, and I also show them the TWE (Test of Written English). This is very effective in showing them the grading criteria, and students really like it. They see it as informative. (Japan)

The CSWE sets the points at which students have to be assessed, determined by students’ readiness, the length of the course, and other external constraints. This is a one-shot thing, though many teachers use a portfolio approach to build up evidence that a student is ready to achieve a particular outcome. The teacher indicates that students will be tested at a certain point. Some teachers inform students and some do not, as they do not think it is “high stakes”. Students do the task and the teacher consults the CSWE
documents to see if the competencies are achieved. A moderation process should be in place, using a kit on moderation. But there is variability on this between course providers. One issue is that the number of assessments that students have to do at any level are so many that it may be driving some students away from the program. (Australia)

*University-type exams* were prominent in other general-purpose programs:

The exam is worth 60% of their grades. I wish it was not so high, but students have to enter the university, and this decides their entry level into the university. This exam is key for assessing their level of entry into the university, how much ESL support, if at all, and how many units they can take. The exam is all writing. Students have to paraphrase ideas, show they know the conventions of academic writing like referencing, write a paragraph with references, and write a plan based on 3 readings. The aim is to assess how well they have taken on board the processes of academic writing. (Australia)

A heavy requirement is that the students have to pass the writing component of the final examination in order to pass the course. They have to demonstrate that they can write, even under pressure, at the level of a particular course before they progress to the next level. If they can show, in the exam, that they have achieved the course objectives, okay. But if they have been getting a lot of help and support with their writing during the term, and they can’t write well on their own in an exam settings, they really haven’t mastered the skills required and are not ready to go on. There is a standardized evaluation grid with 5% for mechanics, 35% for content and ideas, 10% for organization and text structure, 10% for vocabulary, and 40% for grammar and structure. Accuracy and form are particularly important at the university level. Teachers use this same evaluation grid in class, so students get used to the balance (distribution of grades across elements of the composition) and they can also see where more effort is needed. For each assignment each student gets a copy of the completed grid with all the marks broken down. This way, the student should be well-informed of his progress throughout the term, so there won’t
be any big shock with the final grade. (Canada)

Grading tasks was yet another method of assessing achievement commonly described for general-purpose courses:

I do my grading based on how successfully they have done the task, convinced me, analyzed and evaluated and presented the material in an interesting and unique fashion, and how they have put themselves into it, their own writing style, amplified that style, worked on coherence, and especially vocabulary. I try to see how students can identify how to expand their vocabulary to provide more expressive and unique vocabulary. (Canada)

Continuous assessment is the typical practice—no exams. The feedback to students is extensive on their papers, and students seem to heed it, and the grade follows. (Hong Kong)

Portfolios were still another method for organizing achievement assessment described by some instructors of general-purpose courses:

I comment on the students’ weekly pieces orally during individual consultations, and only in terms of the course goals: clarity, directness, details, show don’t tell, and the nature of evidence. Grading takes place only at the end of the course, when they collect a portfolio by choosing their 5 best pieces and all drafts and the final versions of them. (Canada)

There is assessment on their portfolios. Students compose an introduction to their own portfolio in the form of an essay, with introduction, body and conclusion, and they do a self-assessment, pushing them in the direction of meta-cognition about their writing. (New Zealand)

Combinations of assessment methods, moreover, were cited by many of the instructors as ways
of determining student achievement in general-purpose courses:

I take students through a series of tasks that contribute to their final mark. Some are done in class, so I can check, if in doubt. Then there is a comprehensive test at the end, aiming to reinforce all the skills taught, for example, recognizing order of presentation, conclusion, referencing. For the 2 main essays there is a grid of criteria, for example, how well have they answered the essay question, how relevant the material is, have they used evidence, the development of an argument, and their presentation, including language. (Australia)

Fifty-five percent of their grades are for their portfolios, which include their major assignments, media essay, and a letter about their personal learning process, plus 5 to 10 other pieces they choose, which may be an assignment for another course. Twenty percent is for the final exam, which includes 2 essays of 300 to 500 words, marked for evidence of planning, organization, writing skill, and editing. I would prefer not to have an exam, but this is the common way of doing things at this university. (New Zealand)

Some of the diversity associated with these assessment methods was tempered, particularly in institutions with large numbers of similar courses, through moderating procedures to make grading standards consistent:

There are about 7 teachers on the same course, so there is a need to standardize the grading. Teachers come together to decide on criteria. We standardize the marking in moderating panels. One teacher does it first, then a second teacher, then they give it to the group to check. We standardize this for each unit. (Thailand)

Nonetheless, distinctions between specific-purpose or general-purpose orientations appeared overall in instructors’ conceptualizations of student achievement in ESL/EFL writing. When asked what achievements they saw their students making in their ESL/EFL writing courses, instructors in specific-purpose courses focused on a relatively narrow range of
observable behaviors. As noted above, these outcomes were defined, in effect, by the nature of the writing prescribed by the specific-purposes of the writing courses:

They go out being able to write an excellent letter of application. They understand the concept of brevity, not plagiarizing, how to do referencing, bibliographies, footnotes for a report, and they have their c.v.s on computer disc and keep good, fault-free versions. (New Zealand)

They make achievements in the organizational aspects of their writing. They get the idea that information has to be structured to be presented effectively. But 3 months is not enough to learn much language. (Canada)

In contrast, when instructors of general-purpose courses were asked the same question, they mentioned a wide range of differing indicators of achievement. These included improved language and style, increased self-confidence and expressive abilities, more effective composing processes, enhanced rhetorical abilities, and even acculturation into academic communities.

*Language and style* were areas of achievement cited by many instructors of general-purpose courses:

It is rare in a 12-week course to see quantum leaps, but I am still surprised by the predictable pathways in development, for example, many students are able to write more coherent, satisfying conclusions, more aware of morphemes and tense and appropriate use of linking words, better at controlling sentence length and complexity, better paragraphs, referencing ideas. There are so many small things that go together to make good writing. (New Zealand)

*Improved self-confidence and expressive abilities* were cited by other instructors as indicators of achievement in general-purpose courses:
At the advanced level, they show an expanded range of writing and are able to express themselves forcefully and coherently. They seem to be more unique in the way they write. They move away from a standard way of writing, for example, having to do an introduction and conclusion, and realize that the nature of the task defines this, not a pat formula. (Canada)

*Composing processes* were likewise described as another area where students made achievements in general-purpose courses:

They learn how to rewrite an essay, which is something they do not do readily or on their own. Just doing this is an achievement, and they make improvements in the process. The instructors reward it in their feedback, and so the students become aware of it. This is a very formative approach. They also learn metacognitive awareness and goal-setting, how to talk about their writing in a way they couldn’t before. I hope they enjoy writing more after the course. I intend my feedback to be positive. (New Zealand)

*Rhetoric*, as well, was described as an aspect of writing that students improved in general-purpose courses:

Students have no problems expressing themselves, but they have trouble supporting themselves. Students learn to state ideas and support them. They are more conscious of an audience, especially how supporting ideas, and more reader-conscious choices in words, help to make sense to a reader. (Japan)

*Acculturation* into academic communities was the fifth aspect of writing achievement cited by several instructors of general-purpose courses at universities in English-dominant settings:

They are learning the culture of the Australian classroom. Hopefully that will carry on through their degrees. Many of them come in and consult with me. The course helps them with the world they’re going into. (Australia)
V Implications

The orientations that instructors adopt to conceptualizing curricula for ESL/EFL writing instruction appear to influence the ways they assess their students’ achievement. Conceptualizing ESL/EFL writing instruction from an orientation of specific purposes provides a definite rationale for curriculum organization, the selection of learning and assessment tasks, and specifying methods of assessment and standards for achievement. But, as Widdowson (1983) argued, specific-purpose definitions of learning tend to be restricted, limiting the conceptualization of learning opportunities in a manner akin to training rather than to education. The data here show specific-purpose orientations associated with precise kinds of student assessment, focused mainly on the form of writing, rather than the development of individual students, within a limited range of criteria and expectations for student achievement.

Table 2  Tendencies in Assessment Practices Mentioned During Interviews: Specific-Purpose versus General-Purpose ESL/EFL Writing Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Specific-Purpose Courses</th>
<th>General-Purpose Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functions of Initial Assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grouping into classes</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis for instruction</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling students</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functions of Formative Assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping students improve</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining standards</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking assessment to curriculum</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record-keeping</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methods of Assessing Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>✔️</th>
<th>☐</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tasks based on prior needs analyses</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency tests</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating scales and competency tests</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University-type exams</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading tasks</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portfolios</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combinations of assessment methods</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Achievements Observed among Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>✔️</th>
<th>☐</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language and style</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence and expressive abilities</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composing processes</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetoric</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acculturation</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast, as Table 2 shows, general-purpose orientations to ESL/EFL writing instruction were associated with more variable methods of assessment and criteria for achievement, focused on individual learners and their personal development, conceptualized in multi-faceted ways. This view realizes more broadly educational conceptualizations, focused on the capacities (as Widdowson, 1983, termed it) of individuals to improve their language and writing abilities autonomously and in diverse ways.

However, when viewed collectively the very diversity of assessment methods and types of possible achievements across a range of general-purpose writing courses may in itself be conceptually problematic: So many different kinds of student achievements were described by particular instructors in this study, evaluated through so many different methods of assessment, that it is difficult to consider the goals or processes for learning ESL/EFL writing to be similar or even comparable across these courses. Indeed, it may be that students taking so-called general-
purpose writing courses are, in fact, engaged in differing educational phenomena, shaped by the particular criteria, beliefs and assessment methods adopted by particular instructors. This diversity seems all the more fundamental in view of the overall finding of this study that instructors tended to conceptualize and speak about their teaching practices in ways that were unexpectedly uniform from context to context (Cumming, In press).

Several cautions need to be made about these interpretations, though. There is no basis on which I could determine the relative effectiveness of specific or general purposes to ESL/EFL writing instruction, because I did not gather any evaluation data nor systematically observe the instructors teaching. This may be a worthy goal for future research. But such inquiry would have to account adequately for the range of achievement criteria associated with ESL/EFL writing improvement. Moreover, it would be a challenge for research to distinguish precisely between courses that adopt a specific-purpose or general-purpose orientation, given that these categories tend to overlap in many instances, particularly in academic contexts. A further limitation is that interview data present information on what instructors think they do (or may even ideally want to be doing), which may differ from what they actually do in teaching writing classes (as demonstrated in Pennington et al., 1997; Shi and Cumming, 1995). Likewise, if ideas were not mentioned in the interviews, that does not necessarily mean they were not part of the instructors’ repertoire for teaching or assessment. Further, the sample of instructors who reported using a specific-purpose orientation was smaller \( n = 11 \) than those who reported using a general-purpose orientation \( n = 37 \), which may have produced an unduly narrow selection of the range of differing realizations of specific-purpose writing instruction and assessment. Given these constraints, the interpretations presented in this article have to be considered exploratory indications of areas worthy of future inquiry, rather than any kind of confirmation of the value or limitations of either specific-purpose or general-purpose orientations to ESL/EFL writing instruction or assessment.
VI References


