

Writing in English in Italy– the ‘pre-history’ of academic writing

ANDREA NAVA

Università degli Studi di Milano

Received 19 May 2023; accepted after revisions 14 October 2023

ABSTRACT

EN This article aims to investigate the evolution of L2 English writing instruction in the 20th century, focusing on the ‘pre-history’ of academic writing in Italy – when writing was mainly viewed as an ancillary activity, often added to grammar/translation language classes. To shed some light on the principles underlying L2 English ‘composition’ writing instruction, the article illustrates the findings of the analysis of a sample of English writing materials published in Italy between the 1940s and the 1990s. Against the background of a mostly stagnant institutional context, English writing pedagogy appears to have evolved in Italy throughout the 20th century as a result of wider social and cultural changes, as well as developments in applied linguistics. This evolution led to a reappraisal of the role of the learner writer, who was increasingly viewed as an active agent in the process of knowledge transformation.

Key words: ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES, TEACHING OF WRITING, HISTORY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING, ESL/EFL WRITING, ELT TEXTBOOKS

ES Este artículo tiene como objetivo investigar la evolución de la enseñanza de la escritura en inglés L2 en el siglo XX, centrándose en la "prehistoria" de la escritura académica en Italia, cuando la escritura se consideraba principalmente como una actividad auxiliar, a menudo añadida en las clases de gramática/traducción de idiomas. Para arrojar algo de luz sobre los principios subyacentes a la enseñanza de la escritura de "composición" en inglés como L2, el artículo ilustra los hallazgos del análisis de una muestra de materiales de escritura en inglés publicados en Italia entre los años 1940 y 1990. Ante un contexto institucional considerablemente estancado, la pedagogía de la escritura inglesa parece haber evolucionado en Italia a lo largo del siglo XX como resultado de cambios sociales y culturales más amplios, así como de desarrollos en lingüística aplicada. Esta evolución condujo a una reevaluación del papel del estudiante escritor, que cada vez era más visto como un agente activo en el proceso de transformación del conocimiento.

Palabras claves: INGLÉS CON FINES ACADÉMICOS, ENSEÑANZA DE LA ESCRITURA, HISTORIA DE LA ENSEÑANZA DEL IDIOMA INGLÉS, ESCRITURA ESL/EFL, LIBROS DE TEXTO ELT

IT Questo articolo si prefigge lo scopo di analizzare l'evoluzione della didattica della scrittura in inglese L2 nel XX secolo, incentrandosi sulla "preistoria" dell'insegnamento della scrittura accademica in Italia, ovvero il periodo in cui la pratica didattica della scrittura in inglese consisteva in attività di composizione spesso proposte al termine di una serie di lezioni basate sul metodo grammatica-traduzione. Si presenta un'analisi contenutistica di un campione di manuali per l'insegnamento della scrittura in lingua inglese pubblicati in Italia tra gli anni Quaranta e gli anni Novanta del secolo scorso. Se il contesto istituzionale in Italia rimase sostanzialmente immutato nel periodo preso in esame, si assistette ad un'evoluzione della didattica della scrittura in seguito ad un mutato contesto socio-culturale e agli sviluppi della linguistica applicata. Questa evoluzione ha portato a una rivalutazione del ruolo dell'apprendente nel processo di scrittura. Infatti gli apprendenti venivano sempre più visti come proattivi nel processo di trasformazione della conoscenza.

Parole chiave: INGLESE PER SCOPI ACCADEMICI, DIDATTICA DELLA SCRITTURA, STORIA DELLA DIDATTICA DELL'INGLESE, SCRITTURA IN INGLESE LINGUA SECONDA/STRANIERA, MANUALI PER L'INSEGNAMENTO DELL'INGLESE

✉ **Andrea Nava**, Università degli studi di Milano
andrea.nava@unimi.it

1. Writing in English in Italy – a neglected skill?

Writing at the beginning of the 1990s, R. Brodine, an English language instructor at an Italian university, wistfully remarked that “[...] L2 writing [...] may be viewed as a luxury in the present state of many Italian faculties” (Brodine, 1991, p. 46). The author refers to the institutional constraints that have routinely been put forward as the reason why writing has been given short shrift in English language instruction, i.e. overcrowded classes and understaffed English departments. However, beyond its reference to contextual constraints, this image of writing as an “indulgence” seems to be a suitable metaphor for the long journey that English writing instruction has undertaken in Italy over the last hundred years. The starting point of this journey was a stage that, for lack of a better word, I shall call “composition writing¹,” where writing appeared to be mainly viewed as an ancillary activity, often tagged on to grammar/translation teaching and aimed at the more motivated students. The final stage of this century-long journey, on the other hand, which has unfolded over the last two decades, can be encapsulated in the term “academic writing.”

The focus of this paper will be on the “pre-history” of academic writing, i.e. the composition writing stage, and in particular on the decades between the 1940s and the 1990s. In this first part of the paper, I shall focus on one of the main stakeholders in the L2 English writing endeavour, teachers, and provide a brief overview of how English language professionals were trained in Italy in the 20th century and what role writing in English played in this process.

The role that modern foreign languages were to play in Italian schools and as academic subjects for most of the 20th century was a result of policies that were implemented during the two decades of the Fascist regime (*il ventennio*) and remained mostly unchanged until the 1970s. Modern foreign languages did not carry with them prestige on a par with classical languages (Latin and Ancient Greek); as degree options, they were hence viewed as “easier” subjects (e.g. Balboni, 2009; Pellandra, 2007).

For the better part of the 20th century, the most popular route to becoming an English language professional was enrolling in a course in Foreign Languages and Literatures (*Lingue e Letterature Straniere*), which had been one of the three degrees that could be earned within the faculties of Education (*Magistero*) since 1935 (Baldi & Mercanti, 1964; Di Bello, Mannucci & Santoni Rugiu, 1980; Frabboni, Genovese & Preti, 2006). Most universities – particularly those in smaller towns – had at least a faculty of Education², whose main aim was to train future secondary school teachers in the humanities³. Courses in Foreign Languages and Literatures were also found in a restricted number of specialized institutions⁴, while it was not until 1957 that Modern Foreign Languages degree courses were set up in the more prestigious faculties of Arts (*Lettere e Filosofia*) (Nava, 2018a, 2018b).

Before the implementation of the *liberalizzazione degli accessi* (open access policy) process in 1969, whether and what kind of university an Italian student could aspire to attend depended on the type of secondary school they had completed. The more geographically accessible degrees in Foreign Languages and Literatures within *Magistero* faculties were open to students that had attended a four-year secondary school aimed at training primary school teachers (*Istituto Magistrale*)⁵. The limited number of degree courses in Foreign Languages and Literatures within faculties of Economics and Commerce admitted students who held a secondary school technical diploma in Accounting and Bookkeeping (*Istituto Tecnico Commerciale*). When the

¹ “Composition” is taken to be the outcome of “composing,” defined by Grabe & Kaplan as the “combining of structural sentence units into a more-or-less unique, cohesive and coherent larger structure” (1996, p. 4).

² The first faculties of *Magistero* were set up in the universities of Torino, Firenze, Messina and Roma (Turin, Florence, Messina and Rome), and a few years later in the universities of Urbino (1937) and Cagliari (1938). Several other faculties were created after the Second World War, many of which as the only faculty of semiprivate university colleges destined to develop into full-fledged state universities in the course of the following decades.

³ Along with degrees in *Lingue e Letterature Straniere*, faculties of *Magistero* also issued degrees in *Materie Letterarie* (Italian, Latin, History and Geography), *Pedagogia* (Education) as well as a three-year university diploma aimed at those who wished to become heads of primary schools (*Diploma in Vigilanza Scolastica*).

⁴ A degree in Foreign Languages and Literatures was offered by what is now *Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale*. The University of Venice Ca' Foscari (which was a specialized Economics and Commerce university college at the time) and the private *Università Commerciale Bocconi* in Milan hosted faculties of Economics and Commerce issuing degrees in Foreign Languages and Literatures as well as in Economics and Commerce. By the 1960s, two other universities (Bari, Pisa) had set up courses in Foreign Languages and Literatures within their faculties of Economics and Commerce.

⁵ Access to Foreign Languages and Literatures courses within faculties of both Education and of Economics and Commerce was extended to diploma holders of *Istituto Magistrale*, *Istituto Tecnico* and *Liceo Scientifico*, as well as a handful of secondary schools specializing in foreign languages in the two decades following the end of the Second World War.

degree in Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures (*Lingue e Letterature Straniere Moderne*)⁶ was eventually introduced in 1957, access to faculties of *Lettere e Filosofia* was restricted to an elite of students – holders of diplomas from upper secondary schools specializing in the study of the Classics (*Liceo Classico*).

Given their wider accessibility, for most of the 20th century, the *Magistero* faculties most likely produced the highest number of English language teachers in Italy. Out of the seventeen courses that students were required to take over the four-year *Lingue e Letterature Straniere* degree, only six were actually devoted to foreign languages. Students took four year-long courses in the foreign language and literature they wished to specialize in (usually a choice among English, French, German and Spanish) and two year-long courses in an additional language and literature⁷. The rest of the curriculum was devoted to courses in Italian and Latin literature, history, geography and philosophy – not unlike the curriculum that students reading degrees preparing future teachers of Italian, Latin, History and Geography (*Materie Letterarie*) were supposed to follow. Courses were usually assessed through final oral examinations. The only written foreign language exam students had to sit was a *cultura generale* (general knowledge) essay exam focusing on the main language and literature studied. This exam was administered at the end of the four-year course, after the oral language and literature exams had been passed, and it is not far-fetched to surmise that it was viewed as little more than an “add-on” to the main curriculum. Its outcome certainly had little impact on the final mark, as it was only one of a total of 20 marks based on which the final mark was calculated.

The *cultura generale* label has a long history and wide application in Italian education, and is often associated with assessment. According to Baldi and Mercanti (1964), the type of writing in a foreign language required of would-be teachers at the end of their degree by means of a *cultura generale* exam consisted in a literary essay. I have not been able to find samples of actual *cultura generale* essay topics in English⁸, but hints as to the nature of foreign language writing that prospective teachers were tested in is arguably provided by *cultura generale* exam topics in Italian.

As an assessment of Italian writing skills, *cultura generale* was introduced as a mandatory exam for all three degree courses issued by *Magistero* faculties. It was also used as an entrance exam for faculty of *Magistero* applicants, who were actually the only prospective university students required to sit a written test in order to be admitted to higher education⁹. Samples of *cultura generale* essay topics in Italian can be found in handbooks (e.g. *Guida all'esame scritto di ammissione alla Facoltà di Magistero*, 1966) that provided “ready-made” examples of model essays. Essays tended to focus on either literary authors (*Carducci, Pascoli, D'Annunzio. Parlare di uno di questi grandi poeti*¹⁰) or historical figures (*Napoleone e la sua storia*¹¹). The type of compositions students were required to produce were expository texts where they were supposed to display the breadth of their literary or historical knowledge. The wording of the first of the two essay titles provided above is particularly illuminating (*Parla di uno di questi grandi poeti*), hinting with the word “parla” (talk, tell about) at the fact that the texts students were asked to produce were basically the written equivalent of the typical Italian *interrogazione*¹². In these essays, along with their literary or historical knowledge, students were presumably evaluated on whether they had mastered the formal written register. Such a restricted view of writing likely also underpinned the *cultura generale* exams in English that would-be teachers sat at the end of their degree course.

The overhaul of university access policies that stemmed from the student protests of the late 1960s was only one of the changes that affected Italian higher education. Universities were also given the freedom to devise curricula that departed from the ones issued by the Ministry of Education. A survey on the teaching of English in Italian higher education that was carried out at the end of the 1970s (Dodd, 1982) provides further

⁶ The Languages degree course offered by faculties of *Lettere e Filosofia* was labelled *Lingue e Letterature Straniere Moderne* to highlight the fact that these faculties were the only ones which were also charged with teaching and researching the Classics.

⁷ An optional third language and literature could be studied for two years.

⁸ Italian universities are legally required to hold exam papers for only ten years.

⁹ This was part of the *concorso* (competitive admission exam) that those wishing to enrol in the Faculty of *Magistero* had to take. As another regulation dating from the Fascist era, its intent was to limit the number of students who could access higher education and hence thwart the aspirations of social mobility of many young people from lower middle class backgrounds, who were more likely to hold a four-year *Istituto Magistrale* than a five-year *Liceo* diploma (e.g. Charnitzky, 1996).

¹⁰ Carducci, Pascoli and D'Annunzio. Talk about one of these three great poets.

¹¹ Napoleon and his life story.

¹² Throughout their schooling, Italian students are typically evaluated through oral exams – despite the fact that it is the written language that is traditionally the target of instruction (Piemontese & Sposetti, 2014). This engenders, as Anderson pointed out, “a cultural bias towards a dynamic, orally-based mode to discourse production” (Anderson, 1987, p. 137), which hardly prepares students for essay writing.

insights into the role of writing instruction for prospective Italian teachers of English. The freedom granted to universities to propose alternative curricula led many of them to require students to sit written exams in the foreign languages throughout the four-year degree and not only at the end of the final year. The survey respondents, who were involved in the teaching of the English language and/or literature in degree programmes in Foreign Languages and Literatures across Italy, provided detailed information about the contents of lessons and the focus of exams. As regards writing in English, it emerged that, by the end of the 1970s, writing had become a target of instruction in the last two years of foreign languages degrees. The written exams for these final years tended to include compositions and/or literary appreciations, though there was a great deal of variation among universities. Nevertheless, the impact on the actual addressees – future teachers of English – of what writing instruction and assessment was implemented was doubtlessly limited by the large percentage of non-attending students and the low level of students' English proficiency at the onset of their higher education studies¹³.

The aim of this first part of the paper was to consider the issue of English writing instruction in Italy in the 20th century from the perspective of those who were mainly charged with delivering it – Italian teachers of English. I have investigated the university training that English language professionals in Italy typically underwent in the 20th century, and, in particular, the role of writing instruction and assessment in these university curricula. A view of writing as a display of previously learnt knowledge, rather than a process fostering knowledge development, and as a mere “transcription” of oral discourse, seemed to underpin university curricular choices, such as the *cultura generale* essay exams. Changes taking place at the end of the 1960s resulted in a reappraisal of instructional and assessment practices in universities. Whether these had a significant impact on prospective teachers of English remains an open question, given the low number of them actually attending university courses regularly.

While there was relatively little emphasis on writing, in either Italian or a foreign language, as part of the training language professionals received in the 20th century¹⁴ from an institutional point of view, a small but increasing number of teaching materials targeting writing in English were being published in Italy, authored by either English native speaking teachers or Italian teachers of English. In the second part of the paper, I shall attempt to shed some light on the principles underlying English writing instruction in Italy by investigating a sample of such materials.

2. Principles out of practice: English writing materials published in Italy (1940s-1990s)

Short of observing (or relying on reports of) actual classroom teaching and/or accessing teachers' cognitions about their practice, which is obviously hardly ever possible to do in historical research, textbook analysis provides invaluable insights into the ways approaches and methods have been taken up in specific contexts¹⁵. Against a seemingly stagnant institutional context, as was the case of Italian education in the 20th century, textbooks may offer us a glimpse into innovative teaching practices and the principles underlying them, and enable us to reconstruct the processes of adoption, appropriation and refashioning of teaching approaches and methods.

Figure 1 below lists materials aimed at teaching English composition/essay writing published in Italy throughout the decades of the 20th century starting from the 1940s¹⁶. The catalogue of the *Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze*, one of the two national legal deposit libraries in Italy, was searched for Italian-produced

¹³ An average of 37.8% of students regularly attended courses, though the percentage could be as low as 10% (Turin University, Faculty of *Lettere e Filosofia*). As for students' English proficiency level at the start of their degree, according to Dodd's survey, an average of 19.5 % of students were beginners, 35.5% false beginners, 32% intermediate and 13% advanced. Some universities admitted as many as 40% beginners; in particular, courses in Foreign languages and Literatures within faculties of *Magistero* seemed to attracted lower level students (e.g. University of Bologna, Faculty of *Magistero*, 30% beginners vs University of Bologna, Faculty of *Lettere and Filosofia*, 5% beginners).

¹⁴ The neglect of writing in university courses for English language professionals in Italy mirrors the limited role granted to writing in EFL/ESL teaching methodology internationally for most of the 20th century. As pointed out by Matsuda, in the USA, “the teaching of writing [...] was not a significant part of the ESL teacher's preparation at least until the late 1950s” (2003, p. 17).

¹⁵ ELT materials not only inform us of the actual take-up of methods but may also shed light on the type and nature of English that has acted as an input and normative reference for learners/users of English in different contexts and different historical periods. As summarised in Yañez-Bouza's (2016) review, in historical English linguistics, ELT materials (in particular, grammar books) have been used not only to identify “sources for the norms of present-day written standard English” but also “as evidence of language use, variation, and change” (2016, p. 165).

¹⁶ The number of English writing materials published in Italy has increased exponentially since the beginning of the 21st century, although this is still a niche market compared to general English textbooks and certificate exam preparation materials.

English language teaching materials featuring all of the following criteria: a) textbooks devoted entirely or predominantly to the teaching of writing (grammar translation textbooks with a limited number of composition prompts were excluded from the corpus); b) textbooks focusing on general/academic English (textbooks for English for Specific purposes (Zanola, 2023), e.g. business correspondence/writing handbooks, were excluded from the corpus); c) textbooks mainly aimed at classroom use (self-study handbooks for adult learners were excluded from the corpus).

As shown in Table 1, English writing textbooks tended to be produced in Italy by small publishers, often specializing in university textbooks¹⁷, which reflected the niche appeal of these kinds of publications.

Table 1
Italian-produced L2 English writing textbooks (1940s-1990s)

Years	English writing textbooks
1940s-1950s	Words and ideas: book for reading, conversation and essay writing, O. Cavallucci, Napoli, Pironti Editore English essays for University students, F. L. Bell, Napoli, Casa Editrice Campa
1960s-1970s	The gym: raccolta di passi italiani e inglesi per l'esercizio alla versione, alla conversazione ed alla composizione in inglese, A. Vricella, Firenze, Le Monnier
1980s-1990s	Reading and response: practice in advanced English essay-writing and discussion on classic themes, D. Pacitti, Pisa, ETS Composing with words: an approach to writing a university composition, V. Lombardo, COOPLI IULM

The rest of the paper will illustrate the findings of the analysis of four of the books in the corpus of Italian-produced English writing textbooks¹⁸. The data for the analysis have been generated by a close reading and qualitative content analysis (e.g. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Selvi, 2019) of both the textual and the paratextual materials in each of the four books.

The title of Olga Cavallucci's 1953 handbook (*Words and Ideas*) hints at the basic philosophy enshrined in the book: a "command of words and ideas" is essential for a learner to be able to "speak and write." (Cavallucci, 1953, *Advice to the pupils*). The book was probably meant to be used alongside a (grammar translation) textbook as a tool to develop "reading, conversation and essay writing" (Cavallucci, 1953, *Advice to the pupils*) and seems to target lower level (elementary/lower intermediate) students. Composition writing is viewed as the natural final stage of a process starting from the reading of an input text (providing "words and ideas"), followed by the "appropriation" of those words and ideas through guided conversation and ending with the production of a short written output based on some of the vocabulary and content generated in the previous stages.

The book is divided into five parts (see Table 2) devoted to aspects of the natural world, animals, trades, etc. The lessons making up each part feature the same structure: a vocabulary section, where key words associated with the topic are listed according to parts of speech (with phrases being often chosen over single words: e.g. "The cock, (*dim.*) the cockerel: the head (the beak, the comb, the wattles), the wings, the tail, the feet, the spurs, the feathers (the plumage)" (Cavallucci, 1953, p. 1), the input text, the Italian translation of the vocabulary presented at the start of the lesson, notes on the input text (mainly the Italian equivalents of selected words), questions on the text with answer prompts and the "proposed subject" for writing.

¹⁷ See also footnote 18 below.

¹⁸ The fifth book (Lombardo, 1993) was issued by a university bookshop (Cooperativa Libreria IULM) and hence had hardly any circulation outside the university where the author worked. It was thus decided to exclude it from the qualitative analysis.

Table 2
Lessons in Cavallucci (1953)

Animals	The earth	The sea	Town and village	Trades
The cock	The garden	The beach	A suburban street	The baker
Hen and chickens	The orchard	The port	The railway station	The mason
The cat	The farm	Fishing	The post-office	The village blacksmith
The dog	The fields		At the stores	The potter
The sheep	The vineyards		The village market	The joiner
The ass	In the meadows		School is over	The shoemaker
Aquatic birds	In the mountains		The cinema	The tailor
Wild birds				
The zoo				

Like in *cultura generale* exams, writing is viewed as little more than the transcription of oral speech. In her prefatory *Advice to the pupils*, the author emphasizes the importance of mastering the vocabulary listed at the start of each lesson and featured in the readings, which readers are urged to “commit to memory” (Cavallucci, 1953, *Advice to the pupils*) after translating the words they are unfamiliar with. Besides this focus on vocabulary memorization, nothing is mentioned about the specific skills required in the writing process: “Thanks to this acquisition of words and ideas, you will finally be able to answer the questions and – why not – to develop the subject proposed” (Cavallucci, 1953, *Advice to the pupils*). The input texts are poems and extracts from fiction meant as vehicles for “words and ideas,” not as models for the readers’ writing output. The short texts students are required to produce are mainly descriptive (“Describe the most beautiful cock of your poultry yard and speak of his quarrelsome temper” (Cavallucci, 1953, p. 11)), though a few expository and narrative prompts are also provided (“Speak of the good qualities and shortcomings of the ass” (Cavallucci, 1953, p. 26); “Relate how the outcast duckling told his brethren swans of his sad adventure” (Cavallucci, 1953, p. 94)). A final section of the book (“the pink pages”) features what the author calls, in her *Advice to the pupils*, “essential elements for developing the proposed subjects,” (Cavallucci, 1953, *Advice to the pupils*) where the focus is again placed on vocabulary development, as if writing was simply a way of consolidating the breadth of one’s lexical knowledge. The beginning paragraph of one of these “developed subjects” is provided below:

In the poultry yard of the farm there is a very beautiful (or a fine) cock (or a cockerel – or an old rooster). He is called Clarion (or Trumpet – or Chanticleer) owing to his sonorous (shrill, deep-toned, startling, strident) cock-a-doodle-do. (Cavallucci, 1953, p. 132)

The format is reminiscent of “controlled composition exercises” (Pincas, 1982), as students are provided with sentence structures featuring slots to be filled in by alternative lexical items.

Francis Bell’s 1948 *English Essays for University Students* – rather unusually for the time – identifies a specific group of target readers: “students of English at the Universities as well as those preparing for University courses and competitive examinations,” (Bell, 1948, *Preface*), thus also including prospective teachers in the book’s readership, as the mention of “competitive examinations” hints at¹⁹. This book may thus be viewed as the closest candidate to a preparation handbook for the English *cultura generale* written exam as a requirement for degrees in Foreign Languages and Literatures. The “popular topics dealt with in the essays,” (Bell, 1948, *Preface*) however, do not seem to include literary or historical themes, unlike the preparation guides for the Italian *cultura generale* exams. As shown in Table 3, the book is divided into two parts, roughly corresponding to two types of essay prompts (descriptive and narrative).

¹⁹ Qualified teacher status could be obtained in Italy through written and oral competitive examinations (*concorsi*) until the end of the 1990s, when the first postgraduate teacher preparation programmes were established.

Table 3
Essay topics in Bell (1948)

PART I	PART II
A view of Naples from Vomero	A Road Accident
The Rainbow	A Swimming Accident
Travelling in the City	An Alarming Experience
Leisure Hours	“Coincidence”
Moonlight	A Lucky Escape
Street Photographers	A School Visit
The Local Coffee House	A School Sports Day
At the Party	An Operation
Description of a Party Game	In Hospital
Springtime	A Storm
Railways	Travelling Abroad
Street Personalities	A Travelling Adventure
A Sense of Humour	
On “Daylight Savings”	
Posters	
A visit to the Opera	
Habits	
Nature*	
Christmas Time	
Guy Fawkes’ Day	
The Fireside	
Descriptive Essays of Sport	
I. Cricket	
II. Golf	
III. Fencing	
A visit to a Cricket Match	
Football	
Autumn	
A Visit to the Grottoes	

Each essay prompt is followed by a sample essay intended as a model students are to imitate – a process which was thought to somehow lead to readers “developing their style of essay-writing.” (Bell, 1948, *Preface*). As the two extracts in Table 4 show, the emphasis seems to be on exposing students to sophisticated vocabulary and different stylistic options, in the hope this would kickstart the process of finding their own “voice” – a rather tall order, given that the book is aimed at L2 English learner writers and that no notes on lexical, grammatical or stylistic issues are provided to help them ‘notice’ these features in the model texts.

Table 4
Extracts from essays in Bell (1948)

Moonlight	Street personalities
Moonlight; pale, delicate, in which nothing is ever completely and clearly revealed, enchanting the eye with mellow scenes so soothing after the strong light of day; a radiance that is always changing in intensity, silently caressing, wan, cold light, never dazzling, sometimes infinitely pale and feeble [...] (Bell, 1948, p. 17)	[...] You didn’t pay much heed to the voice below; it was only the sleeping subconscious brain that reacted: once awake you ignored the street voices and the street vendor’s voice included. In any case you are not particularly interested in what he is shouting about; selling something or other, naturally, but what has it got to do with you?! (Bell, 1948, p. 33)

While dissimilar in their structure and contents and aimed at students of different English proficiency levels, Cavallucci’s and Bell’s English textbooks share a view of writing as a way of displaying one’s “knowledge of decontextualised facts with little awareness of a reader beyond the teacher-examiner” (Hyland, 2009, p. 9), who arguably plays the role of “editor or proofreader, not especially interested in the quality of ideas or

expression but primarily concerned with formal linguistic features” (Silva, 1990, p. 13). Writing is hence thought to provide L2 students with extra practice in accuracy and to foster vocabulary development. In some respects, Bell’s collection of sample “essays” also betrays the influence of the “current traditional” (Silva, 1990) approach in teaching L1 writing in Anglo-Saxon countries, in particular the USA, with its emphasis on exposing students to models as a way to hone their writing style. The underlying assumption – also shared by early applications of this approach to L2 writing in the USA – is that L1 and L2 writing processes are equivalent, and once L2 students reach an advanced knowledge of the L2 they are virtually indistinguishable from L1 writers. The current traditional philosophy in teaching writing was to develop into a highly structured approach heavily influenced by a revival of rhetorical studies (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). This entailed not only exposing students to ready-made composition models, but also giving them step-by-step instructions in crafting the “building blocks” of the essay frame (introduction, body and conclusion). Nonetheless, the output required of students in Bell’s book and in many later writing handbooks, i.e. a “free composition” (Matsuda, 2003), does not seem to match any genre of academic writing – rather, as pointed out by Grabe and Kaplan (1996), it represents a somewhat unique genre, whose application does not reach beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

The third English writing textbook to be scrutinized, titled *The Gym*, was published in 1970, and highlights a variety of possible uses in its subtitle²⁰, including translation and speaking, as well as writing practice. The book features authentic extracts from the British and American press alongside composition prompts, which the author claimed originated from the careful analysis of the topics addressed in newspapers and magazines at the time. Each chapter revolves around a reading text (with selected vocabulary translated into Italian in footnotes) accompanied by comprehension/discussion questions and composition prompts. While the approach is still one of providing “ideas,” with little support given apart from lexical items mined from the input texts (“words”), among the composition prompts (see Table 5) there are some which require students to develop argumentative texts and to explicitly “take sides” with one view or another.

Table 5

A sample of composition prompts in Vricella (1970)

Composition prompts	
1	At the present stage of human progress, is the hippies’ attitude justifiable? (154)
2	Pornography and a progressed civilization: do you find any real connection between the two facts? (158)
3	Beyond any doubt, we live all the time on the verge of catastrophe in these present days. (165)
4	One thing is to allow new ferments for the growth and development of a better academic situation and another one is irresponsible behaviour: which must be halted. (190)
5	Pornography seems to be one of the worst ills of the present time. Decency as well as reason and wisdom impose a limit to certain forms of so called liberties. (183)

It is apparent that, while not underpinned by a new theoretical approach to writing, this book marks a change from previous materials. The argumentative orientation of some composition prompts, which displaces the learner writer from their “comfort zone” of a mere reproducer of facts, and the choice of topics to be discussed are likely the result of the influence of sociopolitical events taking place between the 1960s and the 1970s. Students were at the forefront of protests in Italy. At issue was not only the overarching Italian school and university “funnel-like” structure, with its hurdles and access requirements dating from the Fascist *ventennio*, but the top-down teaching approach that was the accepted norm at every level of the education system. Protesters called for students’ voices to be heard in classrooms and for the changing world they lived in to become a worthwhile topic of discussion and critical investigation on a par with the traditional canon of historical and literary themes.

Like Bell’s collection of essays, Pacitti’s *Reading and Response* (1986) – the final book to be analyzed – was written by a native English-speaking author who worked as a language instructor at an Italian university. The book’s readership is singled out clearly on the back cover – not only by their assumed level of English proficiency (“advanced foreign students of English”) but also by their more academic interests in the learning of English, i.e. future English teachers (“the standard expected of third and fourth year undergraduates at the University of Pisa,” referring of course to undergraduates in Foreign Languages and Literatures). The subtitle,

²⁰ *Raccolta di passi italiani e inglesi per l’esercizio alla versione, alla conversazione ed alla composizione in inglese.*

Practice in advanced English essay-writing and discussion on classic themes, mentions the by now familiar aims of Italian-produced writing textbooks developing not only “essay writing” but also “discussion” skills. The author singles out three shortcomings in his target readers’ English writing skills that his book is supposed to remedy. The first is what he calls a lack of “a command of appropriate set phrases and idioms” (Pacitti, 1986, p. 11). Arguably as a result of years of form-focused instruction and accuracy-driven assessment, Italian advanced students of English are portrayed as being reluctant to stray from familiar “grammatically correct but unidiomatic English” (p. 11). Different functional types of idiomatic expressions are identified as instrumental in raising students’ level of spoken and written English, and the teacher’s role is said to be one of aiding the students “in fleshing out from these extracts the various idiomatic expressions” (p. 11), and coming to acknowledge the phrase, and not the word, as “the basic unit of expression” (p. 11). The second shortcoming concerns readers’ limited “cultural scope” (p. 11), which the book aims to broaden by including extracts from essays and literature on “a variety of classic themes” (p. 11), from different parts of the world and historical periods. Finally, the author highlights Italian students’ limited experience of argumentation – arguably a result of the top-down schooling model at one time pervasive in Italian education, where students were traditionally expected to acquire and reproduce pre-digested facts with little critical evaluation. Pacitti remarks that “this approach constitutes such an obvious barrier to true knowledge, that one can only conclude that such true knowledge is not in fact the object of the exercise. One wonders what is” (1986, p. 12). To develop their inner “voice,” readers are thus encouraged to provide a critical response to the reading input.

The reading texts (details on the extracts featured in the first ten chapters are illustrated in Table 6) represent the core of the chapters.

Table 6
Reading texts featured in the first ten chapters of Pacitti (1986)

Reading Texts	
1	Aristotle – extract from <i>the Poetics, Tragedy</i>
2	Isaiah Berlin – extracts from <i>The Hedgehog and the Fox</i>
3	Jeremy Bernstein – extract from <i>Einstein</i>
4	William Blake – <i>Night, the Little Black Boy, The Fly, A Divine Image, the Angel, the Smile, Proverbs</i>
5	Anthony Burgess – extract from <i>Introduction to A Shorter’s Finnegans Wake</i> ; extract from foreword to <i>A Shorter Finnegans Wake</i> – extract from foreword to <i>A Shorter Finnegans Wake</i>
6	Albert Camus – extract from <i>The Myth of Sisyphus</i>
7	E H Carr – extracts from <i>What is History? The historian and his facts; Society and the individual</i>
8	Chang Heng – <i>The bones of Chuang Tzu</i>
9	Noam Chomsky – extract from <i>Reflections on Language</i> ; extract from <i>Rules and Representations</i>

The texts are followed by discussion questions and essay prompts (see Figure 1). In his *Advice to the student*, Pacitti outlines a procedure for working through the book. The reading passages are first meant to be read to extract the gist and then to identify useful idiomatic expressions, which students are encouraged to try out in discussion and eventually in their essays. Next, the passages should be read a third time to focus on the content, tackling the comprehension questions appended to each text. Students are advised to write a *précis* of the texts and a short critical response, focusing on those aspects of the texts they are in agreement or disagree with and the reasons why. The last step is essay writing based on one of the prompts provided (see Figure 1).

1. According to Chomsky, what are some of the reasons that make language worth studying?
2. Using as far as possible your own words, in what sense is language said to be a 'mirror of the mind'?
3. What, in your view, might be other areas of human ability that are 'not quite so amenable to direct investigation'?
4. What is the significance of Russell's question in the last paragraph?
5. Consider the following statements, and then write an essay on one of them:
'If language had been the creation of logic, instead of poetry, we should only have one'

'The mind of the hearer is just as active in transforming and creating as the mind of the speaker'
 'All that related to language, that familiar but wonderful phenomenon, is naturally interesting if it is not spoiled by being treated pedantically'
 'We do not learn language; rather, grammar grows in the mind'
 'A knowledge of the name gives a surer knowledge of the thing'
 'Words signify man's refusal to accept the world as it is' (Pacitti, 1986, p. 47)

Figure 1. Sample discussion questions and essay prompts in Pacitti (1986)

The core of Pacitti's approach is again one of giving students "words and ideas" – words being interpreted as phrases used for a given rhetorical purpose, and ideas as originating from examples of published essays on a selection of classic themes. As in previous writing textbooks, the reading input is meant to be used for both discussion and writing practice. Discussion is viewed as a lead-in to writing, as speaking aids students in the first step of appropriating knowledge but it is through writing that "true knowledge" is thought to develop.

The book's emphasis on students' self-expression and the search for an authorial "voice" provide an echo of process-based writing approaches, which started to "revolutionize" L1 writing instruction in Anglo-Saxon countries, notably the USA, in the 1960s, were the target of extensive research carried out by psychologists, educationalists and applied linguists in the following three decades, and began to be implemented in L2 writing instruction in the 1980s (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

3. The 'pre-history' of academic writing in Italy: concluding remarks

In this article, the 'pre-history' of teaching L2 English academic writing – when writing instruction targeted "composition writing" – has been investigated through a case study of the Italian context. While syllabuses and curricula are often imposed top-down by local or national education agencies, whether and how such impositions get translated in the classroom is actually down to teachers, whose pedagogic decisions are influenced – among other factors – by their beliefs, attitudes and knowledge, which are often rooted in their experience as students. For this reason, in the first part of the article, the role of writing in Italian university courses aimed at future teachers of English was scrutinized. For most of the 20th century, writing appeared to be a "luxury" that was tested rather than taught, both in Italian and L2 English, and took up a fraction of the university curriculum aimed at would-be English language professionals in Italian universities. What writing was required of students often amounted to knowledge telling (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) and essays were a way of displaying students' breadth of general knowledge, which usually involved providing chunks of information about literary or historical topics.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that English writing materials produced in Italy were few and far between until the end of the 20th century and often published by small specialist publishers. To carry out an analysis of the evolution of L2 English writing instruction, four such materials published between the 1940s and the 1990s were scrutinized. The findings of the analysis show that, in the face of a stagnant institutional context, we do witness an evolution in writing conceptions and writing pedagogy in Italy throughout the 20th century, which was to herald developments in L2 English writing for academic purposes

at the beginning of the 21st century. This evolution does not seem to consist of discrete stages. As pointed out by Silva in his history of L2 writing instruction in the USA, “[...] particular approaches achieve dominance and then fade, but never really disappear” (1990, p. 11). A focus on the textual product is present – in varying degrees – in all four books, even when the influence of process-oriented writing approaches starts to be detected. All books (bar Bell’s) are also explicitly concerned with providing students with the “words” needed to craft a composition in English – although the view of what kinds of words Italian students may need also undergoes an evolution, as breakthroughs in linguistics start to point to the pervasive role played by fixed and semi-fixed expressions and phrases in fluent speaking and writing. This emphasis on “language for composing,” however, sets the Italian materials apart from English L1 product-based writing approaches as they evolved in the mid-20th century and were eventually applied to English L2 writing instruction in Anglo-Saxon countries. While the teaching of discourse features came to play an important role in those approaches as instruction increasingly focused on the “grammar” of the paragraph by having students develop a composition out of an introduction, a body and a conclusion, no such concern with step-by step paragraph development can be detected in the Italian-produced English writing books targeted in this study.

If one were to single out a turning point in the history of English writing instruction in Italy, this would doubtless be the introduction of argumentative writing, which went hand in hand with the positioning of students as critical readers, as well as writers, rather than passive reproducers of pre-digested facts. The major driving force behind this turning point appears to be the changed sociocultural context in Italy in the 1970s and the 1980s, with student protests and the free speech movement questioning the effectiveness of traditional teaching models and the exponential increase in students entering higher education changing the make-up of the student population. It was arguably this country-wide call for a more democratic access to knowledge that fed into a view of the learner writer as an active agent in the process of knowledge transforming (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) – a view underpinning developments in academic writing which were to take place at the beginning of the following century.

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Andrea Nava, Università degli studi di Milano
andrea.nava@unimi.it

- EN** **Andrea Nava** is an associate Professor in English in the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Mediations of the Università degli studi di Milano. His research interests are mainly in the areas of grammaticography, second language acquisition and the history of language learning and teaching.
- ES** **Andrea Nava** es profesor titular de inglés en el Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras, Literaturas, Culturas y Mediaciones de la Università degli studi di Milano. Sus intereses de investigación se centran principalmente en las áreas de gramática, adquisición de segundas lenguas e historia del aprendizaje y la enseñanza de idiomas.
- IT** **Andrea Nava** è professore associato di Lingua e Traduzione inglese presso il Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature, Culture e Mediazioni dell'Università degli Studi di Milano. I suoi interessi di ricerca si orientano verso la storia della grammaticografia, la linguistica dell'acquisizione e la storia degli insegnamenti linguistici.