



Examining the situational contexts and language use in multilingual writing for teacher capacity building

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Abstract

Analyzing student writing samples situationally and linguistically allows teachers to better grasp the registers of secondary writing and the experiences of multilingual learners of English (MLE). Using a qualitative case study methodology, this study aims to demonstrate how to analyze the situational contexts and language use in MLE writing by comparing two different letter writing tasks completed in U.S. high school science courses. The data sources included ethnographic interviews with MLEs and their science teacher, and student writing samples from refugee-background MLEs. The results indicate similarities and differences in the situational contexts of the two writing tasks, leading to the use of clauses and noun phrases for different functional reasons. Specifically, variations in communicative purposes, teacher expectations, and interactions among the participants resulted in distinct writing processes and experiences. The study provides insights into how MLEs functionally employed clausal and phrasal linguistic features to achieve their writing goals. The study offers practical implications for teachers and teacher educators to develop register awareness and enhance support for multilingual writers across content areas.

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, the contextual interpretation of writing has been recognized as vital to understanding the functional relationship between texts and situational contexts (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Brown & Fraser, 1979; Chin, 1994; Halliday, 1978; Michaels, 1987). While a linguistic analysis of written texts provides insights into language use, examining the writing context holistically helps categorize text types and writing expectations. In writing assignments, how a teacher designs and frames the purpose of an assignment to multilingual learners of English (MLEs) influences students' understanding of what goes into the writing and how it should be written. Some studies have also adopted an ecological perspective on classroom writing and examined other classroom dynamics in writing situations such as student-teacher conferences and first language use (Kibler, 2013, 2019). Besides assignment design and contextual characteristics that impinge upon writing, Michaels (1987) argued that writing is also influenced by institutional and external forces such as training on writing and testing policies. These external factors intersect with the specialized literacy practices in subject areas, which further affect the ways of writing (Moje, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

Despite a clear scholarly focus on multilingual writing in K-12 contexts, few studies have employed a systematic approach to examine the context of secondary school writing. To address this need, Biber and Conrad's (2019) Register Functional (RF) approach offers an analytic lens and structured framework to examine how situational context influences writing produced by multilingual writers. While this approach has primarily been applied to higher education writing contexts, often through corpus-based analysis of writing, it remains underutilized in secondary writing research and practice.

Building on the RF approach as an analytical tool, the primary goal of this article is to analyze situational contexts of two science writing assignments completed in high school science courses and the language used by MLEs to accomplish the communicative goals. The RF approach allows for an interpretation of functional language use and thus illustrates how linguistic choices reflect the writing situations (Gray, 2015). By comparing two writing tasks in terms of their situational contexts and linguistic features, this study aims to provide a nuanced explanation of how context shapes the use of language for particular communicative goals and assist teachers of MLEs in understanding the register of science writing. To achieve these aims, an ethnographic method is adopted to understand the writing practices adopted by a science teacher, writing tasks, and MLEs' writing experiences. The RF approach also offers an analytic lens to identify and interpret MLEs' language use. These insights offer evidence for MLEs' science writing experiences that can inform science literacy, writing integration, and teacher capacity building across content areas. The insights may also be leveraged in needs assessment and writing task design.

Situational contexts and linguistic features of registers

Registers are defined as ‘named, culturally recognized categories of texts’ (Biber, 2019, p. 44). For example, in English or science classes, MLEs must learn to write in specific registers such as lab reports, letters, and persuasive writing. Studies examining situational contexts of writing and MLEs’ language use showed a systematic relationship between context and linguistic features used in registers (Biber, 2019). Broadly speaking, two major registers received extensive attention from scholars with a functional perspective: conversations vs. written academic texts. Everyday English or conversations show different structural and contextual differences compared to the formal academic language or registers in school subjects (Schleppegrell, 2004). Lexico-grammatical structures of language appear in registers to meet the communicative demands of specific situations such as communicating scientific information, writing an argument, or summarizing an article. For example, in a summary task, MLEs might need to employ scientific vocabulary and passive voice structures that commonly occur in science writing.

A situational description of writing is essential for understanding the characteristic features of formal academic registers as the situational context sheds light on the environment or circumstances in which writing tasks are completed (Biber, 2019; Crawford & Zhang, 2021; Staples, 2021). A situational analysis might effectively build teachers’ understanding of the content-language relationship and academic registers in their classrooms, which is often considered a critical part of educator roles by language and literacy scholars (Schleppegrell & O’Hallaron, 2011). An understanding of the situational contexts of writing can help unpack the language-content relationship through a functional analysis. Biber and Gray (2019) proposed a situational analysis framework comprising seven key characteristics of context in which texts are produced: “communicative purpose, participants, relationships among participants, channel, production circumstances, setting, and topic” (pp. 41-46). The present article adopts this operationalization of writing situations to describe the contexts of science writing tasks in a high school science program.

A linguistic analysis of student writing is also essential for interpreting MLEs’ situationally appropriate use of linguistic features associated with academic registers. Studies of written academic registers reported that typically “academic writing is a compressed, informational discourse characterized by the frequent use of phrasal complexity features, such as complex noun phrases, attributive adjectives, postmodifying prepositional phrases, pre-modifying nouns” (Goulart et al., 2020, p. 438) as well as nominalizations (e.g., describe - description) (Biber & Clark, 2002; Biber & Gray, 2022b). In contrast, the register of conversation is characterized by dependent clauses using subordinating conjunctions (e.g., because, when, after) and finite complement clauses (that- or wh- complements) controlled by verbs. While subordinating conjunctions establish an adverbial relationship between dependent and independent clauses, finite complement clauses complete the meaning of an independent clause (e.g., I thought that..., I don’t

know when...). Research on writing development suggests that as students advance in written academic English, they typically shift from clausal structures toward more phrasal structures and nominalizations (e.g., Biber et al., 2011; Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014). This developmental trajectory is evident in secondary student writing samples and classroom texts, which increasingly resemble the patterns of academic registers (Green, 2019). Findings from previous studies using the RF approach guided the selection of the linguistic features used in the analyses conducted in this study.

The current study contributes to the existing multilingual research with a theoretical and methodological application of a register-based framework (RF approach) that both teacher educators and classroom teachers can benefit from. This framework is aligned with ethnographic approaches to writing and literacies as social practices (Barton et al., 2000; Street, 2003) and establishes a sociolinguistic understanding of language variation across conversations, academic writing, and other registers (Biber & Finegan, 1994; Hymes, 1974). The analyses of multilingual writing through this framework can therefore inform writing pedagogy and teacher professional knowledge. As Grujicic-Alatrisme and Grundleger (2020) noted, there also exists a paucity of systematic scholarship on writing practices across the K-16 continuum that inform college writing instructors of MLEs' pre-collegiate writing experiences. This study bridges the gap between secondary and tertiary-level second language (L2) writing by documenting the types of writing tasks that multilingual writers complete and the contexts of their writing experiences. The findings and discussion presented here offer insights that teachers of MLEs can utilize to support MLEs collectively.

Literature review

Language and literacy scholars utilize varied methods to describe the contexts of writing and linguistically analyze developing writing to better understand the registers. These might include conducting ethnographic observations and interviews with informants, reviewing writing assignment prompts, and utilizing texts, and personal experiences among others (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Biber & Egbert, 2023). Developed by Biber and his colleagues, a situational analysis draws on various sources of data for a holistic description of writing situations. The situational framework specifically includes the following parameters: communicative purpose of writing, participants, relationships among participants, channel, production circumstances, setting, and topic among others (Biber, 2019; Biber & Conrad, 2019; see Table 1). Besides writing analyses, the situational framework has also been adopted in writing studies focusing on task design (Crawford & Zhang, 2021).

The RF approach also informs linguistic analyses of writing by offering functional interpretations of grammatical features that contribute to the complexity of writing such as noun phrases and

nominalizations. A noun phrase usually includes a head noun that is modified by other grammatical structures such as attributive adjectives (e.g., color, size, age, evaluation, frequency), nouns, prepositional phrases, and relative clauses (Biber et al., 2021). For instance, all three of the following examples form a noun phrase in which the head noun (kernel) is modified by an attributive adjective, a noun, and a prepositional phrase (e.g., **uncooked** kernels, **popcorn** kernels, kernels **in the bag**). Nominalizations, on the other hand, are also considered nouns, but these are derived from verbs (e.g., test-**test**, react-**reaction**) and adjectives (e.g., safe - **safety**). Both noun phrases and nominalizations function to provide informational elaboration, precise knowledge communication, and structural compression in writing (Biber et al., 2011). The language used in written texts is strongly influenced by the situational parameters of writing (Biber et al. 2021). In other words, writing situations influence how developing writers deploy linguistic features.

Studies using the RF approach have primarily been conducted in the postsecondary education contexts by scholars specialized in corpus linguistics and registers. For instance, Staples and JoEtta (2022) utilized the situational analysis framework and analyzed linguistic features of four college-level writing tasks in first-year writing and engineering courses. They identified a similar communicative purpose in research and design report tasks, both of which required students to solve a problem through research readings. This similarity resulted in similar frequencies of linguistic features that facilitated the problem-solving goal such as pre-modifying nouns, nominalizations, and adverbial and complement clauses which provided (1) descriptive details, (2) introduced goals and needs, and (3) stated findings. For example, problems were introduced and described with nominalizations (e.g., safety, collision) while findings or conclusions were introduced with clauses (e.g., it was found that...) and verbs helping with reporting findings (p. 9). Notably, when students were provided with a model text in one task (but not others), the writers seemed to integrate the linguistic features from the model text into their writing such as first-person pronouns (e.g., we, our). This study demonstrates how communicative purpose and other situational differences such as using model texts shape students' linguistic choices.

Writing contexts and MLEs' language use in K-12 writing tasks have received growing attention in the past decades (e.g., Chin, 1994; Kibler, 2013, 2019; Valdés, 1999) though few studies have directly linked the situational contexts of writing to writers' linguistic choices. Michael's (1987) study of two 6th-grade writing tasks included many of the parameters outlined in Biber and Conrad's (2019) situational analysis framework as well as district and curriculum effects on writing practices. Through an analysis of the writing contexts (e.g., writing conferences, feedback), Michael noted the teacher's implicit values and expectations of writing (e.g., a process approach, discourse organization) that shaped the writing process and students' revisions of initial drafts based on teacher's feedback during the conferences. In a longitudinal interactional histories theory and framework, Kibler (2019) defines an ecological perspective to writing context that foregrounds students' interactions and engagements with key people (e.g., peers, teacher), policies, and resources within the school community and how those circumstances affect student writing. Kibler

called for a detailed account of students' linguistic and agentic decisions in writing, ultimately leading to a longitudinal analysis of multilingual writing. Kibler's (2013) study provided a rich description of MLEs' experiences and writing-related decisions with a sociocultural and ecological perspective focusing on the institutional policies on writing (e.g., tracking with regular vs. advanced level course options) and interactions during writing. The study showed that high school writing practices influenced MLEs' writing confidence substantially, but also lacked the rigor of college-writing, ultimately leading to disappointments among multilingual writers in transitions to college. Yaylali (2024) applied the full situational framework within the RF approach to gauge secondary MLEs' language awareness in content area writing by having MLEs describe writing tasks and responses to science writing demands. The research showed that MLEs developed an awareness of both situational context and lexical demands of science writing. Multilingual writers also demonstrated an evolving understanding of genre structures, communicative purposes, and grammatical demands of science writing.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) scholars emphasize the contexts of culture (i.e., genres) and writing situations (i.e., registers), highlighting how registers influence immediate language choices through different meta-functions (experiential, interpersonal, textual) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Depending on the writing situation, written language shows linguistic characteristics different from speech such as noun and verb groups, and clausal structures that package information (Brisk, 2021). The SFL framework also stresses the role of language functions, model text analyses, and co-construction of texts in a genre-based pedagogy to provide MLEs with language resources during writing (Hyland, 2007; Martin, 2009; Vicentini et al., 2022). Analyzing students' artifacts especially informs teachers about students' needs and strengths (Burke & Hardware, 2015) and inform instructional interventions in ways that standardized tests cannot because student writing is highly responsive to its context. While these two approaches represent different traditions, both focus on language functions. Particularly, the RF approach's functional interpretation of pervasive linguistic features in texts relates to SFL's meta-functions.

As studies showed, writing context is a prominent focus in multilingual writing research. These studies provided ethnographic and descriptive insights into policies and practices at both macro or local levels— with the exception of the SFL framework, which explicitly connects context to language use. The ethnographic and descriptive nature of writing research in the classroom contexts has allowed the field to better understand the social practice of writing and how it is enacted (Paltridge et al., 2016). However, few studies analyzed multilingual writers' drafts and used such analyses in teacher preparation for multilingual writing support. The lack of systematic analysis of learner writing poses a problem for teacher education considering that teachers of MLEs need to be knowledgeable about the language of their content area and ways to scaffold the disciplinary writing during instruction (de Oliveira & Westerlund, 2021). As the number of MLEs in public schools continues to rise in Western countries (e.g., Explore Statistics, 2025; National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2024), it is critical to equip teachers with effective and

practical frameworks to understand multilingual writing. In the U.S. specifically, standardized assessments consistently show disparities in MLEs' writing performances in grades 7-12 (Olson et al., 2017). With MLEs averaging about 11 % of the U.S. public schools (NCES, 2024), the MLE population constitutes an important portion of the mainstream classrooms. Content area teachers frequently encounter them in content areas yet continue to lack professional background to support writing development. Scholars emphasize that teachers need to understand academic and everyday language as different registers (Schleppegrell, 2013). Situational and linguistic analyses of student writing offer teachers nuanced insight into writing practices and literacies in the classrooms as well as MLEs' language choices, informing writing interventions and instructional practices. However, writing remains an area where teachers feel underprepared due to the lack of professional background and access to effective strategies. For teachers to support writing skills and language use (Zeng, 2024), they need a foundational understanding of writing contexts and MLEs' linguistic choices. Context and language features in multilingual writing may serve as valuable data to build teacher knowledge, skills, and collaboration in writing instruction.

Given the growing MLE population and pressing need for pedagogical support, this study centers on the situational contexts of content area writing and the linguistic features of MLE writing samples, foregrounding MLEs' and teachers' perspectives as critical sources of information on classroom writing. Teachers' expectations, writing knowledge, pedagogies, and task designs shape the registers of student writing or influence engagement across content areas. While teachers are often viewed as instructional experts, their approaches to preparing and introducing writing tasks may vary widely. Likewise, multilingual students— as developing writers frequently exposed to various forms of writing— may offer valuable insights into writing processes. The following research questions guided this study: How do two science writing tasks compare across situational parameters? How do the two science writing tasks compare linguistically?

Methodology

Student demographics and data sources

This article draws on a subset of data from a qualitative case study on multilingual adolescent writing in a public high school science program in the State of Arizona, United States (Yaylali, 2024). The high school was located in an urban refugee neighborhood and served a population with over 80 % students of color. Approximately 8 % of the school population was identified as MLEs, which reflected the national average of MLEs in public schools. The multilingual learners who participated in the study were from African, Asian, and South American countries with varying degrees of English language proficiency determined by the standardized assessment (i.e., emergent-proficient). While some students still attended a formal English language development program, others had exited the program after passing the proficiency exam. Permission from an

institutional review board (IRB) was received to conduct this study. A consent and assent form was sent home for student participation in the study while the teachers completed a consent form. Table 1 provides the demographic information about the participants. Eleven MLEs submitted the writing samples collected in the forensics and oceanography courses taught by the same teacher in consecutive semesters. While most of the MLEs took Oceanography in the Fall semester, a few did not take forensics in the Spring semester. All but two of the MLEs previously took one other science course (e.g., biology or chemistry) prior to the forensics and oceanography courses. In forensic science, students composed a conclusion analysis letter while, in oceanography, they composed a letter to a veteran survivor of a U.S. marine accident during World War II.

Table 1. *Demographics of the Participants.*

Participants	Grade Level	Language Proficiency Attained	Source of Writing Samples
Participant #1	10	Yes	Forensics
Participant #2	11	Yes	Forensics only
Participant #3	11	Yes	Forensics / Oceanography
Participant #4	11	Yes	Forensics / Oceanography
Participant #5	11	No	Oceanography
Participant #6	11	No	Oceanography
Participant #7	11	No	Oceanography
Participant #8	12	Yes	Forensics / Oceanography
Participant #9	12	No	Forensics / Oceanography
Participant #10	12	No	Oceanography
Participant #11	12	Yes	Forensics only

Ethnographic interviews with MLEs and the science teacher (Spradley, 1979, 2016), writing prompts, and writing samples were used to describe the situational contexts of writing in the study. Ethnographic approaches using these methods are well-established in writing analyses (e.g., Biber, 2019; Hymes, 1974). Interviews proved crucial for understanding how writing is situated within specific disciplinary domains and cultures. Throughout the interview process with the science teacher (positioned as the disciplinary expert), I deliberately adopted a stance as a novice to the field of school-based science writing. I explicitly described the purpose of the interview as to understand how writing is integrated into the science discipline, presenting myself as an outsider unfamiliar with conducting, teaching, or writing in science courses. This approach, which Spradley characterizes as “expressing cultural ignorance,” encourages informants to recognize the interviewer’s outsider status and share their expertise more comprehensively (p. 61).

In addition to the qualitative description of the writing contexts, a corpus of 15 writing samples was collected from the participants. These student submissions were chosen for two specific reasons: (1) these two courses involved the majority of the participating MLEs, thus yielding more assignment submissions; (2) both courses incorporated letter writing tasks designed by the teacher, which allowed for a comparative analysis of the situational features of seemingly similar genres. However, some other MLEs did not submit their assignments, which limited the number of

samples in the study. Analyzing these two letter writing tasks enabled a closer examination of how two different situational contexts influences MLEs' deployment of the English language in functionally different ways. All the data collected in the study were de-identified by assigning a new code to the participants and anonymizing the collected artifacts and interviews.

Situational analysis method

I utilized the situational analysis framework associated with the Register-Functional approach to describe the writing context (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Biber et al., 2022). The elements of the situational analysis framework assisted in capturing the full range of situational differences and similarities between the two writing tasks (see Table 3). As an iterative process, I reviewed the writing prompts, relevant classroom materials, teacher feedback on student writing, and the writing samples. While a situational analysis may involve interviews with experts producing the texts (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Biber & Egbert, 2023), this methodological practice has not received much attention in the writing field. In this study, I approached the students and the science teacher as crucial sources of knowledge and interviewed them to better describe the contexts of writing. This paper thus offers insights into multilingual writing by bringing a teacher's views on writing and adolescent MLEs' experiences regarding science writing.

Linguistic analysis method

For the linguistic analysis, I selected a subset of the linguistic features identified within the Register-Functional approach (i.e., phrasal and clausal forms) to analyze students' language use (1) nominalizations, (2) grammatical features forming nouns phrases (nouns, attributive adjectives, and prepositional phrases), and (3) finite complement clauses (that- and wh-) as well as dependent clauses forming adverbial relationships (when, because, since, if). In the previous studies (e.g., Biber et al., 2011), these linguistic features were identified as complexity indicators in developing academic writing and everyday conversations (see Table 3). These language forms informed a nuanced analysis of functional language use across the two writing tasks. Noun phrases functionally assist in conveying precise information (e.g., the **salty water in the tube**) while clausal forms communicate adverbial meanings (e.g., time, condition) or complement verb meanings by occupying direct object positions (e.g., I think **that** ...), thereby contributing to syntactic elaboration. In the analyses, repeated language forms were included in the total raw counts (tokens). However, examples that do not accurately reflect a linguistic feature, place names, and modifiers derived from verbs were not included in the analysis. For instance, the bolded words in the following examples, "**salt** water, Greendale **High** School, **United** States, **abandoned** ocean", were not included as examples of attributive adjectives in the linguistic analysis. The linguistic

analysis was completed manually due to the small number of multilingual writing samples. Each of the selected linguistic features identified and counted to assess usage patterns across the writing tasks. For accurate identification of the linguistic features, the grammar book published by Biber and his colleagues (Biber et al., 2021) was taken as a reference. As a researcher and teacher educator, I utilize this book in my courses and research activities frequently. For comparative purposes, frequency counts of each linguistic feature were normalized to occurrences per 100 words because the student writing samples were relatively short—a characteristic typical of secondary school science writing. Furthermore, a detailed qualitative analysis was performed to accurately interpret the functional use of these linguistic features in student writing.

To answer the first research question, I conducted a situational analysis of writing using the RF framework. I then illustrated the analysis of the linguistic features to answer the second research question. Finally, I presented a discussion on potential application of such analyses to provide MLE teachers with considerations for writing tasks, multilingual writing support, and MLEs' writing needs in secondary classrooms. The discussion also explores implications for teachers-researcher collaborations for potential interventions or instructional decisions.

Results

Situational analysis

Below is a description of the situational characteristics of two science writing tasks (i.e., letters) that MLEs wrote in oceanography and forensic science courses (RQ1).

Letters to survivor.

The oceanography course was offered in the Fall as a full-term course granting a science credit for high school graduation. The letters addressed Mr. Adolfo Celaya, a survivor of the U.S.S. Indianapolis cruiser that was sunk during World War II (*participant*). Before the assignment of this letter, students received information about the navy veterans or various survivors of the U.S.S. Indianapolis by watching videos and interviews related to the history of this event (*topic*). The writing task was the culmination assignment of the learning activities about the remaining survivors of this tragic event. The purpose of the letter was to ask any questions that students had about the survival experience of this navy recruit who lived in Arizona as well as share any personal thoughts or feelings related to this event (*communicative purpose*). Although the survivor was the main addressee of this assignment, the letter was initially read by the teacher and received feedback (*participants*). Furthermore, students were able to provide or receive voluntary peer feedback on each other's writing although this was not a structured process (*participants*). The

students primarily typed this writing assignment at home (*setting*) and submitted it virtually to the classroom learning management system (i.e., Google Classroom) for feedback and grading (*channel*). Table 2 summarizes the situational characteristics of each writing assignment.

Table 2. *Situational Analysis of Two Writing Tasks.*

Elements of a Situational Analysis	Letter to Survivor	Conclusion Analysis Letter
Communicative Purpose	To share questions, emotions, feelings and empathy.	To inform the principal of a lab test result.
Topic	The survival experiences of a navy veteran	The status of white powders found in student lockers.
Participants	Student, Mr. Adolfo Celaya (authentic audience), teacher	Student, teacher, peers, an imaginary principal
Relations among Participants	Teacher as the expert and feedback provider; power dynamics in place	Teacher as the expert and feedback provider; power dynamics in place
Channel	Writing mode	Writing mode
Settings	Written at home	Written in the classroom and at home
Production Circumstances	Peer interactions on the writing task, drafting, revising, and editing	Teacher discussions on the writing content, but no peer interactions on writing

The *production circumstances* in this assignment showed various forms of teacher involvement and interaction with students. The teacher's involvement was primarily to scaffold the writing process. During the interview, the teacher said, “I did show them how to address a letter and how you put the name and went through that process of how to do it and [end with] ‘sincerely’. They did a rough draft. They had peer editing for it...”. The existence of a real external addressee led the teacher to engage the MLEs in peer-review, drafting, editing, and revising. The process of editing and revising the letters provided the teacher with more control over the final product because the survivor would be reading the letters. The teacher expressed that the letters needed to be reviewed for any errors prior to being physically mailed to the survivor. However, the criteria for evaluation of writing were not established. Students received teacher feedback in Google documents. During the interview, the teacher stated that he would benefit from strategies to provide effective feedback on multilingual writing, showing his willingness to work more closely with the MLEs. Below are samples of the letters.

[Sample letter 1]:

Dear, Adolfo, Celaya,

Hi my name is [Student's name] and I am writing because we watched a video in class I am a student at [School name]. And I was interested in how your life has been. Hope you are doing well.

These are some questions I have for you: How did you feel about the people around you, did you trust them, or did you try and took care of yourself? Why do you think you made it out alive? How was this situation affected your life after you made it out alive? How is your mental life going? And how was this recorded? How come you didn't give or drink the water? Would you ever want to swim with sharks if you had the opportunity [sic]?

[Sample letter 2]:

How are you? The purpose of this letter is to inform you that as we were learning about the USS Indianapolis survivors. When we heard your speech and some other videos made me have to ask you some questions about their ordeal during and after rescue praise, and opinions. What was your ordeal during the situations without knowing if they ever come to rescue you? How did you manage to be different from others at times on the third day when others were drinking salt water from the ocean? What was your important medal that you received that makes you so proud of yourself? Why did you decide to choose to play basketball for a school? How did you feel about racism? Were you able to live with it all the days of your life? I thank you for the responses that you will give us [sic].

[Sample letter 3]:

Dear Mr. Adolfo Celaya:

Hello, My name is [Student name]. I am an eighteen years old girl and a senior at [School name]. I started my freshman year at [School name] as a refugee from Uganda, in 2016 who knew nothing but spoke a little broken English and I will be graduating in 2020. It's nice to meet you even though it's through a letter. I am a girl who has a dream of being a model and helping people around the world who are in need of help and suffering. My life has been amazing since I came to the United States, you might be wondering why it's been amazing for me to come here and I will tell you why, so since I came to the US, I went to school without worrying about paying school fees. I've eaten food without thinking I will go hungry the next day or have lunch or dinner for tomorrow. In my oceanography class we watched a video about the USS Indianapolis. I was truly amazed by the story, not that I'm

happy about what happened to those who didn't survive but how strong everyone stayed and fought for their lives. I'm glad that I'm writing this letter to you. I would love to say that you fought the hardest road to where you are now and I'm so proud. You inspired me to work hard no matter where I am or everything I want and need in my life. I have much respect for soldiers like you and don't ever blame yourself for what happened that day. It's in the past and we will keep honoring those who didn't survive. I would love to meet you in the future if that's possible [sic].

Sincerely,

As seen in the letters above, multilingual writing samples varied by length and content. While the first two shorter samples above primarily include a students' questions to the survivor (How did you feel about the people around?), the third one shows more personal and emotional content (My life has been amazing ...). During the interview, the student who wrote the third letter stated, "he [the teacher] told us to write what we feel and how. So, I wrote whatever we felt in our heart to feel, like I told him basically about my life and his life. It's not the same, but we're surviving. We're here [in the U.S.]. We're alive". In this example, she found similarities in the survival experiences of the navy veteran and herself prior to immigrating to the U.S. Another student showed empathy for this survival experience by saying, "I think that if I was in your place the first shark, I would see would give me a panic attack". Since this letter was flexibly designed to include any personal perspectives or questions due to the topic being human experience, patriotism, and emotions, variation in the content was evident.

Conclusion analysis letters.

Similarly, the conclusion analysis letter was an assignment used in the forensics course offered in the Spring term as a full-term course granting a science credit for high graduation as well. In the interview, the teacher mentioned appropriating this task from general letters and forensic reports that law enforcement officers would write in criminal cases. Situationally speaking, this assignment utilizes students' prior knowledge of letter writing and simultaneously integrates writing the results of a drug test conducted on white powders (*topic*). The *communicative purpose* of the assignment was to write a letter to an imaginary principal (*participant*) of a high school where the white powders were hypothetically found in student lockers. The science teacher indicated that this writing task had an informational goal because its primary goal was to inform the principal about the results of the white powder tests. The teacher stated that students needed to tell the principal (*participant*) which of the several given bags contained a drug after conducting a series of experimental tests. The students had to engage in problem-solving, critical thinking, and inquiry-based learning.

Students completed the conclusion analysis writing task on computers, both in class and at home (*setting*). While students discussed their observations on the chemical interactions of the white powders, no peer or teacher review was embedded in the process, limiting the task's interactiveness in the classroom (*circumstances of writing*). The communicative purpose (to inform the results of tests only) influenced the content, centering student responses to only relevant information although some variation was still visible. In other words, students were only asked to provide the results of the drug test, but as both samples show, students deviated from this goal slightly.

The influence of the teacher's expectations on the writing process was evident. He designed the task as the culmination of a lab test and learning activities about chemical reactions to draw connections between content and the writing task. The teacher's expectations became clearer as he discussed the writing process during the interview. He did not expect to receive elaborate writing responses, but rather a casual response or 'a general note'. In a worksheet, students had already completed a table listing the reactions of the powders to different chemical processes (e.g., making bubbles, boiling, sinking), so their task was to transfer their notes to a short writing task and relay the conclusions based on their observations to the principal rather than discuss all the reactions observed in the drug test. The submissions received feedback from the teacher in a Google document only after the submission was complete (*relationship between participants*). This feedback was not intended for revising and resubmitting the assignments since the situation included a hypothetical principal, rendering this letter a less interactive and more solitary writing task. The sample letters below exemplify how students constructed the conclusion analysis letters.

[Sample letter 1]:

Dear, school principal regarding our finding from the unknown powder that we tested. It has been found that it was a table salt not a drug. According, our testing we used our method of using the known drugs first before the unknown powder. Additionally, the known drugs that were used first are brogaine, speculate, rotaran, barrop, and even table Salt. Presently, all the known drugs are correctly put into chemical tests in order to be able to identify the unknown drug. In brief, the results came as true as the chemical testing revealed them to us that it isn't a drug [sic].

[Sample letter 2]:

Dear principal,

I have been in the lab making tests to figure out what the powder was in the student's locker. I do believe that my tests are correct. If you have any concerns, please contact me. I do believe that the powder in the locker was (D-Barrop). While I

tested other powders, I got different reactions, but some were the same except one. This powder was the only one that melted on the hot plate and when I tested the powder that was in the locker, I got the same reactions, and I am able to prove that [sic].

Both samples share the conclusions of the drug tests briefly, aligned with the teacher's expectations. The second writing sample also includes some information about the observations (e.g., melting). Teacher feedback on the content was not available on either writing sample while only one sample spelling correction was originally made by the teacher.

Similarities and differences between writing tasks.

It is clear from the situational analyses that the contexts of these two writing tasks (letter to survivor vs. conclusion analysis letter) show common situational characteristics such as participants (teacher, external addressees, and/or peers), relations among participants (power differentials), channel (writing typed on computer), setting (home), and some of the circumstances of production (limited discussions with peers). However, certain differences also exist that are important to note: *teacher expectations* and *interactiveness*.

While the letter to survivor required strict obeying to the genre features of general letters (e.g., greeting, ending, address, date), the conclusion analysis letter required strict obeying to the findings of the lab test, demanding the writers to communicate specific information, leaving little space for any other content. The writers were required to integrate information drawn from their observations of the chemical reactions. Although both letters included a dialogue with a distant interlocutor (a survivor or a principal), the letter to the survivor included emotions, personal experiences, empathy statements, and questions from students, providing more flexibility to include personal and private content. Having an external interlocutor also contributed to the interpersonal nature of the writing tasks.

The letter to the survivor assignment involved more interactional characteristics due to the intentional peer interactions and teacher's written feedback in a Google document, which assisted students in revising their letters addressing the real audience. However, the interactivity in the conclusion analysis letter was limited as this assignment was designed as a brief report on lab observations to an imaginary principal who would not read the letters. Instructions on the genre structure of the second letter were less rigidly specified in the classroom as the only expectation applied to the genre structure of the letter was the informational content (i.e., conclusions) that were presented in 1-2 paragraphs per the writing prompt. MLEs' learning experiences in the English classes as well as their familiarity with letter writing from the letter to survivor assignment

in the previous semester likely provided them with a schema to compose the conclusion analysis letter.

Also illustrated in these analyses, multiple data sources played a critical role in mapping the situational context of writing such as interviews with teachers and students. The students' and teachers' perspectives assisted in capturing the nuances in the situational characteristics of the writing tasks. Interacting with the constituencies of writing provided a wide understanding of the writing done and thus helped with a more comprehensive description of written tasks.

In the interviews, MLEs also shared the challenges that they generally faced during the completion of both letters. Many students expressed difficulties in understanding the tasks and felt that they lacked adequate time to discuss the expectations of these tasks with the teacher. Multiple MLEs reported struggling to accurately form clarifying questions about science topics, which led them to meet with the teacher privately at the end of the classes. Opportunities for external writing support were not available at the time (e.g., bilingual staff or family members).

Linguistic analysis

A linguistic analysis of the two tasks was conducted by drawing on the pervasive linguistic features found in previous register studies (RQ2). The linguistic features used in the analysis (i.e., phrases and clauses) are provided in Table 3 along with their frequency counts. After an overview of the frequency information, a functional interpretation of these linguistic features follows.

The frequency counts (tokens) of the nominalizations and attributive adjectives in the two groups of writing tasks show different tendencies. Conclusion analysis letters, which are strictly based on the observations in the experiments, included more nominalizations (4.7 vs. 0.9 per 100 words) and attributive adjectives (4.3 vs. 2.1 per 100 words) compared to the letters to survivors. Very few prepositional phrases and nouns as modifiers were used in both tasks, likely due to the short writing tasks and the constrained nature of the tasks that did not expect plenty of descriptive content. Furthermore, this tendency reflects the findings in the linguistic studies on academic writing development. As an example, a prepositional phrase would be suitable in the second letter to the survivor where the question "How did you feel about racism?" would benefit from some clarification by adding "racism **in the school**". Similarly, in the last sentence of the first conclusion analysis letter sample where the student uses the pronoun *it*, the pronoun could be replaced with "the white substance in the locker isn't a drug".

Table 3. *Grammatical Features Used in the Linguistic Analysis.*

Modifiers of Nouns in Phrasal Structures	Clausal Structures
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	Nominalization	Attributive Adjective	Prepositional Phrase	Noun	Adverbial Clauses Finite Complement Clause (that and others)
Secondary School Registers	Raw Frequencies (Token) vs. Normalized Counts per 100 Words				Raw Frequencies (Token) vs. Normalized Counts per 100 Words
Letters to Survivor (N=8) Total Words (1508) Mean (189) Range (109- 294)	13 vs. 0.9	25 vs. 1.6	16 vs. 1	6 vs. 0.3	35 vs. 2.4
Conclusion Analysis Letters (N=7) Total Words (1019) Mean (146) Range (99- 125)	48 vs. 4.7	44 vs. 4.3	8 vs. 0.7	7 vs. 0.6	19 vs. 1.8
Key	+Attributive adjective (e.g., hot plate) +Nominalization (e.g., investigation) +Prepositional phrase not including <i>of</i> phrases (e.g., tests on the powder) +Finite dependent clause (adverbial) (e.g., When I added water to the powder) +Complement clause (e.g., I think that the weather is too cold to go out)				

Clausal structures such as adverbial and finite complements were employed slightly more in the letters to survivor, which might not be considered a striking difference (e.g., you might be wondering **why**...). A further analysis of the samples also showed that both letters involved first and second persons (e.g., you, yourself, them, we, I) that contributed to the engagement of the external audiences in the letters. Diverging from the conclusion analysis letters, the letters to survivors also included verbs and adjectives to communicate emotions and opinions (e.g., glad, proud, believe). Table 4 shows examples of the linguistic features along with their functions in the given samples.

In the conclusion analysis letters, nominalizations, a more frequently used language feature, were primarily employed to communicate the results of the experimental tests (e.g., results). It is possible that the primary focus on writing the results led MLEs to leverage certain nominalizations consistently in their writing (e.g., results, findings, reactions). Similarly, since the assignment required a descriptive presentation of the results, adjectives likely contributed to the accomplishment of this writing goal. MLEs seemed to describe the materials and the context of

the test with adjectives modifying nouns (e.g., chemical test). In the letters to the survivor, though, the students frequently used descriptive details through adjectives to show their emotions, opinions, and empathy in their letters as they explored the survivor's experience in videos played in the classroom (e.g., dangerous war, admirable person, bad memory).

Table 4. *Linguistic Feature and their Functional Roles.*

Language Feature	How it assisted in the letter (function/use)	Examples in Student Writing
Adverbial clauses	To express reason for appreciation (LS)	I really want to praise and express my special thanks to you because you are courageous .
	To express reasons for conclusions (CAL)	I came to this conclusion because when I made the hot plate test, the powder melted the same as the Barrop did .
Complement clauses	To ask questions about the experience with mental verbs (LS)	Did you ever think that you could not survive ?
	To share conclusions with reporting verbs (CAL)	It has been found that it was a table salt not a drug .
Nominalizations	To express concepts related to service (LS)	Thank you for your commitment to serve this country.
	To introduce the results or findings (CAL)	I have the results for all these powders.
Adjectives	To describe the context of the event (LS)	I didn't know how you survived from that dangerous war.
	To describe the test or the materials (CAL)	Presently, all the known drugs are correctly put into chemical tests in order to be able to identify the unknown drug.

Note. Conclusion analysis letters and letters to survivors abbreviated as CAL and LS respectively.

A common function of adverbial clauses used in both letters was to express *reasons* either for personal appreciation of service or the conclusions reported in the letter (e.g., because). The complement clauses differed in their usage in the letters by being used with some mental verbs (e.g., think, feel) to ask questions in the letter to the survivor or being used with reporting verbs to share the results in the conclusion analysis letter (e.g., find, reveal).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how two letter writing tasks in science compared to each other across the situational parameters of the Register-Functional (RF) approach and how those tasks compared in terms of students' linguistic choices. The analysis revealed that teachers embed specific values, expectations, and perspectives into the design and implementation of each writing task (e.g., corrections on mechanics or acceptable information to include). As disciplinary scholars reiterated, these values and expectations suggest the disciplinary specific ways that writing is enacted (Moje, 2015) as well as the contexts that influence secondary writing (Kibler, 2013). Influenced by these classroom dynamics, the two letter-writing tasks differed situationally across multiple criteria as well as MLEs' language choices although certain commonalities existed between these two writing tasks.

Content of the letters varied in terms of informational, interrogative, and personal/emotional content, which reflects the distinct communicative purpose of each task. For example, letters to survivors incorporated writers' emotions, questions, expressions of empathy, and sometimes personal survival experiences from refugee-background students. These letters' organization and content was also influenced by the teacher's emphasis on accuracy. In contrast, conclusion analysis letters prioritized information derived from experimental tests and did not involve a structured feedback process.

The presence of an authentic audience (i.e., the survivor) combined with the teacher's strict genre requirements influenced the level of interaction and revision positively in the first letter. The conclusion analysis letter, however, involved minimal interaction features as instructed by the teacher (e.g., greeting, closing) and received less feedback, which illustrates the teacher's authoritative role in determining the writing process. In contrast to the first letter writing practice, this writing context provided limited opportunities to discuss the language use and structure of this genre. This led to less explicit writing instruction on how the conclusion analysis letters text could be structured and why it was written in the way it was (Hyland, 2007, p. 151). MLEs would likely benefit from such genre-based conversations prior to constructing the letters.

More frequent deployment of linguistic features associated with developing academic writing—such as attributive adjectives—in the conclusion analysis letters aligns with the informational nature of this writing type while a larger corpus of student writing might provide more generalizable evidence. Occurring in both tasks with different frequencies, these linguistic features functioned differently in the letters to survivors, primarily serving to describe war contexts and personal life experiences. Clausal structures, though occurring with similar frequencies across both tasks, exhibited distinct patterns, mainly expressing reasons through adverbial clauses. Complement clausal structures functioned differently between tasks (i.e., asking questions vs.

presenting conclusions) while their usage was largely determined by verb choices (mental verbs vs. reporting verbs).

One advantage of employing situational analysis through interviews was to reveal variability in student responses and their engagement with writing tasks. In both assignments, content and linguistic features were influenced by task expectations (i.e., asking questions vs. reporting conclusions). The content of the writing samples in the corpus demonstrated that more content variability in the “letters to survivor” as this task allowed for personal experiences and emotional content when students introduced themselves. Such a move was encouraged by the teacher and was not viewed as a deviation from the task. Conversely, the conclusion analysis letters, which required specific information such as experimental data, displayed less variability due to more constrained task design.

Situational analyses of writing tasks might also assist in needs assessment (Crawford & Zhang, 2021). By carefully analyzing multilingual writers’ experiences and understandings of situational contexts, their needs can be more accurately identified (Yaylali, 2024). Teachers, as disciplinary writing experts, can make more informed decisions about designing and integrating writing tasks within their subject areas. For instance, incorporating interactive activities into writing circumstances (e.g., peer feedback, online teacher feedback for revision) can support MLEs’ use of linguistic features as verbal and written interactions might provide opportunities to revise initial drafts. The appendix provides practitioners with a practical resource that can guide teachers’ efforts to reflect on writing activities in their classrooms and identify linguistic features commonly used by their students.

This study has implications for writing instruction and teacher professional development as well. For example, writing tasks across different subject areas (e.g., English, science, history) and grade levels can be systematically aligned based on teacher expectations and personal/informational content demands. A stronger understanding of MLE writing through such analyses could also facilitate the formation of professional learning communities among grade-level or department-level teacher groups. Without such alignment, multilingual writers may continue to experience substantially different writing processes (e.g., presence or absence of peer interaction, teacher feedback, revision opportunities) and produce texts varying significantly. The secondary L2 writing field and teacher education programs might integrate situational analyses of writing contexts to inform instruction, MLE support, and writing policies so that multilingual writers receive consistent support across disciplines.

The situational and linguistic analyses of writing tasks within two high school science courses support our understanding of letter-writing assignments as examples of school-based genres in a science education program. Conducting situational analysis enabled me, as the researcher, to

distinguish more effectively between seemingly similar writing genres. Such analyses can serve various purposes, particularly in developing understanding of register similarities and differences. If situational and linguistic analyses can be leveraged strategically across secondary writing practices throughout the curriculum, several critical questions emerge: How might situational analysis be incorporated into school-wide writing projects for feedback mechanisms across different subject areas? To what extent can such analyses generate valuable data for enhancing teacher collaboration on multilingual student writing? While future empirical research may address these questions more comprehensively, specific situational characteristics identified in this study—such as teacher expectations and external audiences—as well as linguistic choices offer insights that could inform writing feedback. Educators might deliberately integrate interactivity among students to receive and integrate feedback on writing or give global classroom feedback based on observed patterns in student writing. Teachers can also incorporate a genre analysis of model writing samples in various modes to provide MLEs with writing and language support (Zeng, 2024).

Conclusion and limitations

The primary goal of this article was to analyze the situational contexts and linguistic features of two letter-writing tasks completed in forensic science and oceanography courses that identified similarities and differences in both writing processes and MLEs' intentional language use. Following the RF approach (Biber et al., 2021), this exploratory paper has illustrated how situational and linguistic analyses of secondary multilingual writing samples could be leveraged to examine science writing practices and texts written in a high school science program. Although the RF approach has been underutilized in secondary school writing contexts, this study offers an opportunity to consider this methodological framework as a valuable tool for interpreting writing contexts and integrating writing instruction more effectively. The affordances of the RF approach allow educators and researchers to construct a more contextualized understanding of writing situations and MLE experiences and critically reflect on science writing tasks from a situational perspective.

The situational and linguistic analyses of two letter writing tasks also allowed me, as a researcher and outsider to the science classrooms, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the differences in disciplinary writing contexts and interpret written science registers linguistically. Interviews with both the teacher and multilingual writers served as valuable sources of insight into writing contexts, which is a methodological contribution to writing studies in secondary education settings. Ultimately, understanding secondary writing contexts may help bridge the persistent gap between secondary and tertiary levels of writing instruction. The analyses presented in this article respond to calls for consideration of situational context not only in transitional spaces of higher education

such as first-year writing and intensive English courses, but also in lower grades of schooling (Grujicic-Alatriste & Grundleger, 2020).

The limitations of this study stem from its substantial reliance on teacher and student interviews. These interviews proved invaluable for mapping the situational contexts of writing and constitute a methodological contribution to the secondary L2 writing field, but future research might also benefit from capturing and analyzing student-teacher conferences and peer-to-peer interactions during writing activities to provide more comprehensive descriptions of writing circumstances. An additional limitation is the small corpus size, which constrains the generalizability of the linguistic analysis findings. Future studies employing larger corpora could conduct more robust quantitative analyses to better elucidate how linguistic structures function collectively to accomplish writing goals and offer more definitive conclusions regarding the functional use of the linguistic features. As the only data coder in this study, I would also like to acknowledge this limitation.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights for both teachers and teacher educators. A situational and linguistic analysis of student writing can make teacher collaborations more structured and focused while promoting peer mentoring in writing—an area often challenging for content area teachers. Ultimately, such an analytical lens in student writing is to enhance teachers' instructional capacity and linguistic knowledge to better support multilingual writers across disciplinary contexts.

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Appendix

A tool for analyzing writing situations and language use in student writing

Situational Analysis Features	Observations / Notes from Your Class
Communicative Purpose Topic Participants Relations among Participants Channel Settings Production Circumstances	
Examples of Linguistic Features in Annotated Excerpts	
Key and Examples <i>Attributive adjectives</i> (hot) Nominalization (reactions) <u>Prepositional phrase</u> (in the locker) <u>Finite dependent clause</u> (when I test the powder)	A Conclusion Analysis Letter Dear principal, I have been in the lab making tests to figure out what the powder was in the student's locker. I do believe <u>that my tests are correct</u> . If you have any concerns please contact me. I do believe that the powder <u>in the locker</u> was (D-Barrop). While I tested other powders I got different reactions but some were the same except one. This powder was the only one that melted on the <i>hot</i> plate and <u>when I tested the powder</u> that was in the locker I got the same reactions and I am able to prove that.

Complement clause (that my tests are correct)	
Key and Examples <i>Attributive adjectives</i> (mental) Nominalization (situation) Prepositional phrase (around you) Finite dependent clause (after you made it out alive) Complement clause (you made it out alive?)	A Letter to Survivor Dear, Adolfo, Celaya, Hi my name is [student's name] and I am writing because we watched a video in class I am a student at [school name]. And I was interested in how your life has been. Hope you are doing well. These are some questions I have for you: How did you feel about the people around you, did you trust them, or did you try and took care of yourself? Why do you think you made it out alive? How was this situation affected your life <u>after you made it out alive?</u> How is your <i>mental</i> life going? And how was this recorded? How come you didn't give or drink the water? Would you ever want to swim with sharks if you had the opportunity?

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