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Some Suggestions for Academic Writing Instruction at English Teacher Training Colleges

It is a cliché to say that teaching writing skills in English is no easy job. This is not just how students feel, but lamentably is also an opinion shared by many English teachers (particularly at the college level), who dread the weekly stack of compositions to be marked. Another problem for teachers is that writing classes necessarily involve some repetition and thus boredom ensues; after all, how many exciting essays can be assigned, discussed, and graded, and what variety of procedures can be used for that purpose? For many writing instructors, these issues are amplified when teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at the advanced level. Learning to write in an academic context in English is a tremendous challenge for students because to master the writing style requires an understanding of an academic text's logic, structure, and formal vocabulary. To teach academic writing effectively means dealing with time-consuming processes of drafting and revising while facing the real deadline of producing an acceptable final composition. Thankfully, there are many resources and ideas that teacher trainers can draw on, and this article will offer a handful of suggestions to make the writing process more manageable.

Writing courses for teachers-to-be

At the advanced level, it takes a large investment of class time to reach the point where teacher trainees are able to use rhetoric and mechanics to write quality academic texts, including argumentative, persuasive, expository, and technical essays. A principal objective is to make the trainees proficient in the use of the academic register, as the audience that they and their future students will write for are English teachers at the college level. This means they will have to eventually know the cohesive structure of academic texts, as well as the specialized vocabulary, formal grammatical features, and how to appropriately

quote, summarize, and paraphrase from sources.

In an academic writing course for future English teachers, the instructor's attention is clearly divided between the process of writing and producing a final text. The process approach, which gives trainees indispensable insight into what writing in English will be like for their future students, covers stages such as generating ideas, drafting, evaluating, redrafting, and error correction (White and Arndt 1991). If writing focuses solely on producing a product by strictly following models and relying on teacher-centered instruction on technique, there is a tendency to neglect the development of essential writing skills that students will need for the long-term. Nevertheless, the final product is always a main concern because being able to produce one is mandatory if trainees are to obtain their teaching qualification and their prospective students are to succeed in college.

Time constraints and the process approach

There is no doubt that the process approach to writing works well with teacher trainees because it increases their confidence by making them aware of the several stages needed before the final product can materialize. The question is how to balance the need to effectively teach these processes with the final goal of creating a product. A major drawback is that the stages of the process approach usually require more time than seems available. The two suggestions below deal with this problem by providing more time for working on the processes of draft generation, revision, evaluation, and error correction.

Use of the warm-up period

Initially, in order to give a choice to my students, I usually allow a selection of two or three topics to write on. What students wish to include is decided in pairs, with little, if any, interference from me, as long as the outlines are clear and logical. First drafts are then produced in pairs or small groups, which usually exhausts a 90-minute class. The class periods that follow deal with completing the first draft based on feedback and revision until the final draft is produced and graded. To use time more efficiently, some process activities can be completed by devoting the warm-up period of each class to reviewing previous drafts, responding to homework paragraphs, revising a work in progress, or having students write a short summary of either their own or another student's composition.

Use of peer error correction

Error correction of students' writing also creates time pressure, which is relieved by having students grade each other's papers. Error correction at the advanced level should be done through this peer correction procedure, which is clearly more beneficial to learners than exclusive feedback from the teacher (Ur 1996; Adams-Tukiendorf and Rydzak 2003). A specific peer editing strategy to make error correction more efficient is to have one group of peer editors focus on one aspect—whether it be organization, logic, vocabulary, or grammar—and have other groups focus on other aspects.

Nevertheless, it is important to realize that error correction can sometimes cause more problems than it fixes. Over the years, I have observed that Polish students find it difficult to respond to others' writing by asking thought-provoking questions or making useful statements that inspire their peers to improve a composition, although some of them do try to imitate the comments I use when evaluating their writing. What students are prone to do instead is correct with red ink all the mistakes they find. Many teachers do this as well because they are trained to focus on language accuracy and often consider it necessary to identify all types of errors, including spelling and punctuation, that are less important than the organization of content or quality of ideas. This is a problem because correcting everything can discourage students and actually inhibit their writing. According to Leki (1995, 4), "there is probably no aspect of higher education more antithetical to using a process approach to teach writing than the requirement to grade student writing." For this reason selective error correction is commonly advocated by methodologists (Byrne 1992; Harmer 2001; Ur 1996). With selective correction, it is important to mark only those errors that distort meaning. When students are trained in how and what to correct, peer feedback and the use of anonymous mistake sheets definitely contribute to a "nonthreatening environment" (Leki 1998, iv).

Despite the obvious advantages of teaching and learning writing as a process, the product-related question remains: "What tasks should be used to get the students into the habit of expressing themselves academically, objectively, and impersonally?" It does not help that students only read a limited number of academic texts during their first two years of college, inside or outside of class. Indeed, if any are assigned, the language is generally felt to be too demanding and thus discourages students. Consequently, a lot of stress must be put on regular in-class practice, usually in the form of workshops. To help students engage in the processes of writing and move towards a final product, teachers must think about the best ways to access and develop materials that motivate students to write.

Finding appropriate texts for academic writing tasks

It is not easy to find academic ready-to-use materials to suit the particular needs of English teacher trainees, although there are several excellent writing books that offer texts and tasks fitting a wide range of academic disciplines, such as Trzeciak and Mackay (1994), Walker (1997), Jordan (1997; 1999), and Heffernan, Atwill, and Lincoln (2000) to name a few. Obviously, teachers must review these books because different sections will apply to different students. As one of the leading college writing experts in Poland put it, there is a need for selective use of writing handbooks because they "are intended for an audience ranging from students and teachers to researchers" (Macpherson 2004, 7).

In addition to these books, there is also a need for supplemental course-related materials to teach advanced academic writing to trainees. It must be stressed at this point that the seemingly simplest option—i.e., setting trainees to work with fragments of their own diploma projects in progress—may mean that the writing instructor is doing part of the project supervisor's job, which is inappropriate and pointless. Therefore, I will share some of the tasks that I have used successfully with college students over several years. I have devised and tested the following tasks for use with either pairs or groups, although they work equally well for individual practice. Each of the following three tasks may be followed up with routine mistake worksheets, peer correction, and additional academic summary or paraphrase tasks.

1. Reacting to an academic review. To practice the academic register in combination with paraphrase and summary skills in short, timed exercises, I give students copies of brief reviews of language teaching resource and methodology books. After reading the reviews, the students have to imagine being the authors of the books under review and write one or two paragraphs that could come from the publication being reviewed. The easiest part to simulate is a passage from an introduction or a conclusion. This has worked well, as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching terminology is familiar to trainees. As a follow-up, students exchange their work with others, who are then instructed to suggest a title for the book or to write the next one or two paragraphs, continuing what the first student wrote.

2. Comparing two academic articles. To instill in students the habit of reading academic texts and skillfully incorporating the content into their own writing, I carefully select pairs of brief *English Teaching Forum* articles. To date I have most successfully used the "A View of the Past" reprint series from 2002 that features excerpts of several influential articles relating to EFL teaching methodology from past decades (Harshbarger 2002; Sullivan 2002). Topics have included conversation classes, authentic English versus classroom English, management of large classes, and teaching strategies. Students receive two articles and then incorporate themes from both of them into one piece of writing. For example, they use two articles to describe how conversation classes can contribute to increased learner interest, or another pair of articles to write about problems connected with teaching large classes and possible solutions. I usually require that students cite each article once in the course of their own text. This task is conducted collaboratively and can also be used for examination purposes.

There are also other options for students to synthesize ideas from two sources. For instance, the instructor can provide several different definitions of two concepts, such as "literature" or "Old English," and ask students to write about both concepts in a paragraph

or essay while using paraphrase and a fixed number of properly acknowledged citations. Students may also be asked to juxtapose any two academic issues they can think of, such as two writers, two historical epochs, two language teaching approaches, and the like. This is effective as it allows them to select topics they are currently working on and with which they are very familiar.

3. Summarizing authentic academic essays. For a longer and more complex end-of-term exercise, likely to take about three classes, I select an authentic academic essay and present it, unabridged and untampered with, to the students. These model texts should ideally be intellectually controversial and thought-provoking. Some volumes of essays that have been popular with my students are Sutherland's (1996) *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?*, Lerner's (1975) *An Introduction to English Poetry*, Yule's (2006) *The Study of Language*, as well as chapters from English and American social history handbooks. After an initial period of vocabulary study and dictionary work, I divide the text and assign one or two paragraphs per pair or small group. The task is to summarize the text and to make sure to avoid plagiarism. When students are finished I collect the summaries and put them on one page without any improvement whatsoever. This page can then serve as a worksheet for error correction during the final class. (See the Appendix for an example of this task.)

In the previous three tasks the teacher's role is that of organizer, prompter, resource, tutor, and finally, the assessor (Harmer 2001. The collaborative tasks are necessarily monitored by the instructor, who can offer guidance and helpful suggestions as needed. An obstacle to be avoided, however, is excessive reliance on the teacher's advice by some student writers. Instead, there should be unlimited access to quality monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. (Students may require prior training to use them efficiently.)

Conclusion

As illustrated, the focus of my EAP writing classes is not only on process writing, but also on the finished product. I do agree with Yan's statement that "the product approach still has some credibility because at some point there will be a final draft that requires attention to grammar, spelling, and punctuation" (Yan 2005, 19). In addition to reducing the time required for use of the process approach, the techniques and strategies offered here motivate teacher trainees to engage in the difficult stages of academic writing and to produce a final draft. There is no problem using these techniques repeatedly because, as Showalter (2003) reassures us, teaching differs from scholarship because it "does not have to be original to be good" (9). Most importantly, if academic texts and supplemental exercises offer intellectual challenges and lie within the scope of the trainees' academic interests, the benefits of tasks based on them will remain unquestionable.

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