ACADEMIC WRITING Vs. COMPOSITION[1]

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Observation and investigation indicate that academic writing tasks are generally quite different from those required in Freshman Composition classes, with respect to both process and product. This paper argues for teaching academic writing and describes selected practices which have been successful with advanced ESL students.

As Low (1982) argues, in the context of testing writing, the standard essay test is not a good test of the type of paper writing required of many students, especially foreign students, in their university programs. Among his various criticisms, the most relevant to the argument here are those dealing with the differences between writing a paper within the confines and context of a subject-matter course, particularly in science and technology, and writing Freshman Composition essays. Each year of teaching foreign students--in an institute, in the English Department, and in content courses--has strengthened my conviction that ESL teaching and testing should prepare students for writing tasks other than those in English courses, whether or not the latter are required. I believe that we should focus more on academic writing, both process and product, and less on the composing process (Zamel 1982).

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[1] A modified version of this paper first appeared in two successive issues of TECFORS. Part two was co-authored by Daniel Horowitz.

Our analyses have shown that academic writing tasks require very little generating of ideas, but rather the student's task is to select, organize, and express information, either to answer an essay question or to write an informative or argumentative paper in which there is little or no room for personal opinion. In our work, we have found little support for the theory of contrastive rhetoric (Kaplan 1967). Differences in linguistic-cultural background do show up at the sentence level--Venezuelan English and Korean English are still noticeably different with respect to errors and mistakes, and students from all fields and languages have problems with academic vocabulary (Martin 1976)--but there seems to be a factor of organizational-logical-rhetorical control exercised by the data, no matter what their form. This classroom observation is supported by work carried out in Shanghai by Johns, Brosnahan, and Coe (1983), who urge that composition teachers look at "real" paragraph development and modify their syllabi accordingly. While I agree with Zamel's (1983) criticism of composition pedagogy and texts, I join Johns, Brosnahan, and Coe in viewing the product, and thus the process, of academic writing as being very different from those of Freshman Composition.

We have tried a variety of tasks and procedures in an effort to identify those which most effectively and efficiently produce transferrable skills of value to students. We have attempted to analyze these activities in order to incorporate useful organizational-conceptual principles into other activities. This paper will briefly describe the activities which appear to be of greatest utility in advanced precollegiate and university writing courses.

On the basis of information gathered by 1) formal and informal surveys of university professors' writing assignments; 2) our own experiences in university courses in a variety of fields and levels (none of the teachers involved has been an English major); and 3) interviews of former and current students enrolled in university courses in diverse fields at both the graduate and the undergraduate level, we have centered not just the writing instruction but rather the entire four-to-five hour block of instruction in all skill areas principally on the rhetorical functions of informing (exposition) and persuading (argumentation). Working from these macrofunctions, we have elaborated a list of communicative functions, drawing heavily from such sources as Munby's (1978) taxonomy, the Reading and Thinking in English series (Widdowson 1980), and Academic English (Rossi and Gasser 1983). We use this list of microfunctions as we select and create materials for each class, no two ever being identical because we devote a substantial portion of the time to a set of mini-ESP units, in which students work with field-specific content related to their majors.

We agree 100% with Kaplan (1982) that the ESL student should be provided with content, that the writing teacher's concern should be what the student does with the data. Both Kaplan and Low (1982) were referring specifically to testing, but we are more concerned with teaching. In the classroom, we do have time to work through the whole process of selection and evaluation; we are not constrained by time to concentrate only on organization and expression. We are not teaching content; neither are we rewarding library work or prior knowledge. We provide the content. The student's task is to read and understand the content, then to use it appropriately in the assigned task. This data source may take one or more of several forms:

a. Sentence combining exercises serve a variety of purposes such as providing a check on reading comprehension, eliciting specific grammar points, conveying needed information, etc, as well as modeling for the student the type of information and organization suitable for a particular kind of paper. Our exercises do not in any way resemble those described and criticized by Zamel (1980), but rather they are almost entirely paragraph or longer exercises such as those found in Sentence Combination (Pack and Henrichsen 1981) and The Writer's Options (Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg 1979). Although some are used for individual assignments, many are done by the entire group and discussed step by step, as I have described elsewhere (McKee 1982a and b).

b. Data in non-prose form, with or without accompanying text, give the student practice in expressing information already acquired. Authentic text in the student's field is a good source (e.g., Herbst's pamphlet contains a great deal of information but very little prose text). We ask our students to bring us copies of articles of interest to them. We create exercises based on these materials.

c. Lists of bits of information, such as the last exercises in Sentence Combination, require the student to create at the sentence level, much as one does when constructing prose from notes taken during a lecture or while reading.

d. Reading selections (one or more on a topic) require comprehension, selection, and possibly evaluation before writing in answer to the specific question(s).

e. Lectures, alone or in combination with reading selections, serve the same purposes as reading selections but require aural comprehension and provide opportunities to help the student learn how and when to question.

The students take notes on the readings and lectures, always having access to their notes and to any printed material given out, for we are not testing recall. The writing tasks range from expression of all the data given, as in a sentence combining exercise, to selection of data to answer an essay question, to selection and evaluation of evidence to support a thesis in a documented argumentative essay.

In this last task, we have abandoned the traditional library research paper and turned to a group project, a four-week project in which all the students are given the same source material with instruction in how to read it, how to evaluate it, how to deal with statistical data, and how to write it up (Horowitz 1983a). Each student writes an individual paper, choosing a side or arguing that the evidence is inconclusive. This project, in our opinion, truly teaches the students how to select and evaluate evidence in the way that they will have to do this when they are writing for professors who know the fields. The Freshman Composition teacher in the traditional research paper course is forced to rely only on the apparent quality of the source (a professional journal versus Reader's Digest) and whatever can be discerned about internal logic and consistency when evaluating this aspect of the documented essay, the aspect which will be of most concern to the content area professor.

The preceding example is the practice most obviously and directly related to future academic writing. It is not necessary to hope that the skills learned will be transferrable, for these are the skills needed in academic writing in most fields. However, other activities have also proved useful. Among these, the most clearly relevant are those which involve analytical and critical thinking in English. We have had great success with such activities as the Propaganda Game (McKee 1982c), which involves no actual writing but whose utility as a generalized pre-writing activity is demonstrated by the conspicuous effects in such areas as argument skills, careful reading, certain syntactic and semantic problems, and organization. This activity is one of two 'stamp out the error' tasks we permit, for we are absolutely opposed to putting ungrammatical sentences in front of students.

The other is critical analysis of each other. They are assigned to produce short oral argumentative presentations, based on knowledge, not opinion. These are videotaped for later dissection, and each student is given a transcript of the talk (with the grammar fixed by the instructor) and a worksheet which leads the group to find the weaknesses and flaws in the argument (Horowitz 1983b). This method requires a great deal of work and thought on the part of the teacher, but the results are infinitely superior to those we have had with published materials.

The proportion of Oriental students in our program has increased recently, bringing about a noticeable problem with listening comprehension. To meet this need while continuing to stress reading and writing academic prose, we have used published materials (Mason 1983, Rossi and Gasser 1983) as a start, creating additional material to accompany their activities and creating other materials to use with less satisfactory publications and with authentic text. We find that information transfer tasks, in the form of a cause-effec diagram, a classification tree, or some similar conceptual scheme, not only help the students comprehend the material but also result in concrete guidance for the organization of the data in the subsequent essay task. We use real speakers and authentic text as much as possible, and we find that content does indeed significantly determine both organization and choice of linguistic items, perhaps a writing manifestation of the Bauhaus School of Architecture slogan: Form Follows Function.

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