Research Insights on Second Language Writing Instruction

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Most educators applaud an increased focus on writing in academic settings, taking for granted the value of a literate public. But learning to write well for academic purposes, beyond basic literacy, is difficult in a first language and more so in second one. Ostensibly to address this difficulty, most universities require students, including second language (L2) students (i.e., those for whom English is a second language), to take freshman writing courses. This digest focuses on insights from my long-term research on the writing experiences of a group of L2 university students. These insights suggest possible ways of making writing classes more useful to such students.

Insights from the Research

Although not all L2 writing professionals would agree, I start from the assumption that L2 academic writing courses exist to help prepare students for writing in disciplinary courses. This assumption leads to two initial ironies. First, during their first 2 years at the university, while the students in my study were enrolled in writing classes, they were required to do almost no writing in any of their other courses. Second, the students who were able to produce successful papers by the time they graduated learned to do so not in writing classes but over the course of their undergraduate years, mainly through writing in courses for their majors, despite the fact that the instructors for those courses often did little more to teach writing than simply assign it.

Despite these ironies and despite the fact that most L2 students I have encountered would postpone or avoid writing courses if given a choice and simply get on with their disciplinary courses, once these students are enrolled in writing classes, they want to benefit from them. If institutions require the students to take these courses, they have an obligation to make the courses as useful as possible.

The conditions that allowed the research participants in my study to become successful L2 writers by the end of their undergraduate careers included the following:

- *Time.* Several years spent developing knowledge of the topics they wrote about in their majors.

- *Experience.* Experience in writing not as a goal for its own sake but as a tool required for gathering, examining, and relating information.

- *Guidance.* Help in writing in courses for their majors, which often came in the form of feedback on early draft attempts.

- *(Again) Time.* Several years using writing as a tool for real purposes.

If these conditions are indeed significant in helping students become successful writers, L2 writing classes are most likely to be effective when we can reproduce these conditions. How might we do so?

Matching Goals of Writing Instruction

Writing courses are more efficient and useful to learners when learner and curricular goals match. L2 students come to writing classes with their own ideas about what would be useful to them and not wanting to waste their time (or money). But when course goals do not match student goals, both teacher and learner have uphill battles. Even for motivated students, learning another language and learning to write in that language are difficult, long-term processes. If learners feel the writing class is not serving their needs and purposes—a perception reinforced by having no writing to do outside the writing class—the difficulties inherent in developing writing ability are exacerbated.

The goals of college-level L2 writers coming into writing classes are often primarily to learn to write faster, with better vocabulary, and with fewer grammatical errors. Those would be some (though not all) of my goals for such students as well, but we might not necessarily agree on how to achieve them. For that reason, it seems essential to discuss and negotiate course goals with students. But lines of communication must not go only from teacher to student and never back or, equally detrimental, go back but with no effect. It is critical to explain to students, particularly adults but also high school students, why we assign the tasks we do and how we expect those tasks to further both our and their goals, and then to take into account students' responses to the tasks and adjust the tasks as needed.

Student Needs

One unfortunate feature of most L2 academic writing classes is that they are freestanding, self-contained, and detached from the rest of students' academic lives. Yet the rationale for these classes and the purpose for learning to write usually reach beyond the writing class into other courses or into real-world needs. For this reason, it would be better for L2 writing courses to be attached to, not detached from, real writing needs. One way to do this is to consider how to place these courses strategically in students' academic careers, rather than, for example, shoveling L2 students through writing courses in their first year in college, when they are typically taking general education courses that assign little writing, then assuming that successful completion of the course means writing has been taught. Instead, L2 writing courses might be more useful if they were made available when the students had writing assignments in other courses and could put to use the support a writing class can offer to complete that work. In universities, content-based curriculums as well as linked courses use this kind of approach (Benesch, 2001; Kasper, 2000), but the principle would be the same in adult education settings and in high schools: The most beneficial writing course would be one whose goals reach beyond the class as an end in itself toward real writing needs.

Focus of Instruction

If such major curricular adjustments are not possible, aim for the development of academic writing courses where writing is the

means to some other end—a crucial tool needed to accomplish another goal. The goal might be gathering, learning, and sharing information on some matter of significance to the gatherers, such as issues related to the school or the community, and attempting to exert an influence through some form of writing. For example, one teacher in my program had her L2 writing students do a service learning project in which they helped a community organization develop press release statements for an information campaign. Writing was unavoidable but not the goal of the project. Emphasizing writing as a means of accomplishing other goals drives home to writing teachers (students already know this) that learning to write academically is not an end in itself but rather is an effort toward beginning to develop a tool for use elsewhere. This tool of writing takes shape best not in the vacuum of freestanding writing courses but when used for the real purposes it is intended to fill.

The Knowledge Base

In creative writing courses, writers necessarily invent the content of their texts. But having to invent content for expository, nonfiction writing is not only a burden for already overcharged L2 writers, it also fails to reflect what occurs in most academic writing contexts, where more typically the writer has a substantial knowledge base developed over a period of time and through a variety of sources, including textual and any combination of oral, visual, and experiential input. The writer's job is to determine how to manage the information, figuring out what to include and where, not to expend time and energy figuring out what else to say about a topic (Leki & Carson, 1994). Managing information already at hand does not mean that writers discover no new ideas as they are writing, or as they are rereading their writing. Certainly writing is often a discovery process that clarifies our ideas for us on the topics we put our minds to as we write. But it is difficult, painful, and often unproductive to be required to write on subjects we know little about or about which we have nothing particular to say. Instead, writing assignments work better and have more intrinsic usefulness if the writers write from information and knowledge, textual or other. Longer writing projects on a single or limited number of topics not only allow L2 writers to build up some knowledge but may help them develop confidence that they can write longer, more complex texts.

Experience

Over and over in the literature on L2 writing and in interviews with research participants, a theme that comes up as a point of terrible frustration is how long it takes these students to write English texts: hours to produce one page, three times as long as it takes English-dominant students. This time factor is an enormous burden for L2 students, and the only way they can achieve a faster pace of producing text is through more experience. However, experience is not the same as practice. Practice usually means focusing on some isolated feature of a whole enterprise and working on that for the sake of making that one feature better, assuming that this improved feature can then be reinserted into and improve the whole enterprise. The feature might be grammar or topic sentences or any isolatable part of a written text.

Unfortunately, in an attempt to make parts of the whole learnable, writing classes run the risk of focusing excessively on practice instead of experience. Experience is holistic, encompassing the whole enterprise and entailing a purpose beyond practicing writing in the writing class. To become faster or more efficient at accomplishing a task, it is necessary to go through the process of doing it. If the final goal for L2 academic writers is to write fairly lengthy papers on academic or intellectual topics based on knowledge they have accumulated, this is what they should be doing in writing classes, where they have teachers trained to help them.

Cognitive Processes Enmeshed with Social Contexts

Feedback is part of most useful writing experiences. For the L2 students in my study, disciplinary faculty, particularly in the students' majors, frequently offered to read first drafts of assignments and respond to them. The realization that these faculty were not trying to teach writing but instead were trying to help the students do better on those particular assignments drove home another point, although it is again a point that not all writing professionals would agree with: Writers do not improve directly through a teacher's intervention; it is texts that can improve directly through intervention. The writers improve only through the writing they are doing, through their intellectual and emotional engagement with it. A teacher's effect on the writer can only be indirect; the teacher offers the opportunity to improve a text, thereby allowing the student to improve as a writer. In other words, improving writing proficiency is an internal process that only the writer can access directly; teachers cannot. This indirection inevitably means that developing facility in writing or improving writing ability is a long, slow process that demands focused attention and opportunities for experience. This complex process simply cannot be completed in a year of writing courses.

A more subtle feature of this process is that it is necessarily embedded within a context of how the writer's work is received (accepted or not accepted, for example), how the writer is received as an individual in a particular social setting (with high or low expectations, for example), and how the writer wants to be received within that socioacademic context, including the writer's self-image, desire for affiliation, and interest in joining that community (Leki, 2001) .

Critical pedagogy's analyses of identity construction, positioning, and differential power relations warn that we cannot view the environment in which these writers are learning writing and language as neutrally giving everyone open and free opportunities to become whatever they desire if only they set their minds to it. The contexts of writing both make possible and constrain linguistic development of all kinds, including writing.

Nevertheless, if writing is taught and used appropriately in academic settings, it becomes a fine tool to help students acquire and deepen their understandings of academic content, the academic language they are learning, the world around them, and even themselves.

References

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