

Academic Writing: A Practical Approach

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Abstract:

Drawing on nearly two decades in the classroom environment, both in Japan and the UK, the authors of this reflective paper outline key features necessary for supporting a practical approach to the teaching of academic writing courses. Key findings suggest that students benefit most from academic writing courses in which components are introduced in a gradual and systematic way, and in addition to collaborative activities, students are encouraged to learn independently, wherever appropriate. As well as observations made during academic writing classes, the authors also draw on students' responses to survey questions. The paper aims to provide a general guide for teachers which they can tailor to suit their own materials and methodology.

Key words: academic writing, cognition, collaborative, systematic, learning outcomes

Introduction

Writing a research paper can be a daunting task for any student. Indeed, many native English speakers find the task difficult to begin with (Bethany, 2016). For a student writing an academic essay in a second language, the burden can simply seem overwhelming, especially when not given the necessary encouragement or guidance (Bodnar & Petrucelli, 2016: 40). Many students simply give up when the enormity of the task first presents itself. Concepts such as arguments, citations, sources and research may seem alien, even in their first language.

“Academic writing is a much-desired skill in tertiary students. However, among ESL students, academic writing is often perceived as overwhelming mainly due to ESL learners' lack of grammatical and vocabulary competency. In an Asian context, most students have not engaged in academic discourse in their formal writing courses during secondary school education and are often introduced to academic writing at university” (Giridharan, 2012: 579).

However, with correct guidance, the task need not be as onerous as it first appears to be. Writing an academic paper can be a thoroughly satisfying and, ultimately, an immensely rewarding experience. The undertaking not only provides the student with a great sense of achievement, it can also equip the student with lifelong learning tools. By providing relevant context, simplifying jargon and introducing techniques at the appropriate time, the teacher can enable students to quickly develop the requisite skills for the successful completion of an academic writing course.

Before starting an academic writing course, the majority of students should have a good basic knowledge of the mechanics of essay construction. Students should generally understand the overall structure of a multi-paragraph essay and probably be familiar with the general conventions associated with formal writing. What is usually lacking is the specialized vocabulary and familiarity with more advanced writing concepts such

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as proposing and supporting arguments, transitioning, researching and paraphrasing source materials. These ideas can be slowly introduced once the student has a solid framework on which to build.

This paper will focus on how instructors may help students develop their writing skills for academic writing courses. The paper will focus mainly on nurturing practical writing skills rather than specific linguistic skills. Fostering paraphrasing skills, for example, is something which deserves its own academic inquiry.

The paper draws on research from many disparate parts of the world, and is not limited to ESL/EFL teaching in Japan. Specific areas will include:

Students Responses

Context

Simplification

Familiarizing and Consolidating

Recording and Organizing

Differentiated Activities

Maintaining Enthusiasm

Reducing Incidences of Plagiarism

Developing Students' Essays

Literature Review

The volume of research on academic writing is quite substantial. For any serious educator, improving teaching methodology in order to generate the very best learning outcomes should be the primary motivation for teaching.

Instead of simply providing examples, many educators believe students need to develop a more complete understanding of writing devices in order to become successful academic writing practitioners. The teacher must therefore utilize the power of group work tasks:

“The basic thrust of the eclectic approach, which Howard termed as collaborative pedagogy, is to enhance students' experience of writing, with instructors acting as motivators and evaluators” (Howard cited in Alharbi, 2017: 35).

In fact, Olszewska & Lock even go so far as to state that collaborative work, in so called ‘writing groups’, can also be of great benefit to academics wishing to publish (2016: 134). Luna and Ortiz also espouse the use of collaborative tasks to enhance learning (2013).

Moreover, Entwistle & McCune, espouse the notion of the “deep approach” to teaching which is diametrically opposed to the superficial learning of simply providing examples: “The “deep approach” which emphasizes understanding learning processes, is clearly a different concept from organizing effort and concentration related studying strategies” (2004).

In his further studies, Entwistle found that the “deep approach” could have a positive effect on students' learning as it “results in conceptual understanding” (2005 cited in Cetin, 2015: 172). Cetin elaborates by explaining that: “The deep approach is directed by the need to complete a task in an appropriate and meaningful way, which leads to using the most appropriate cognitive functions for working on a task” (2015: 172).

Other academics also support this ‘immersive’ approach to teaching academic writing skills:

“The main characteristic of the deep approach involves students engaging in a task by using the most appropriate learning processes for completing the task satisfactorily” (Biggs 2001 cited in Cetin, 2016: 21-22).

Furthermore, as the classroom continues to become ever more globalized and technological tools impact the writing process, Street argues that what constitutes good academic writing, linguistically speaking, should also be reappraised (2015: 114). Therefore, students of varying linguistic proficiency may benefit from taking academic writing courses due to the multifarious skills such courses require.

Student Responses

The academic writing courses delivered by the Department of Global Media Studies (GMS) at Komazawa University give students the opportunity to choose a topic at least one week before classes actually start. Prior to this academic year (2017-18), a list of example topics and thesis statements was circulated to give students an idea of what topics qualified as academic and how thesis statements should be phrased. Unfortunately, this usually resulted in some students simply copying or closely following the examples given. Although the motivating factor for doing this was to assist less proficient writers, it did, of course, remove initiative and creativity from the writing process.

During the second or third week of the course, students attend a library orientation session in which a member of the library staff delivers a presentation and gives a workshop on using the research facilities. Students are introduced to online databases and have the opportunity to carry out searches for themselves. Here, students can work collaboratively when conducting searches and teachers often require them to complete tasks to reinforce procedural knowledge.

Students taking academic writing courses at Komazawa University were asked a series of questions about their level of understanding and general attitude towards the course (see Appendix for details). Students were specifically asked which part of the course they found the most challenging, and whether they felt the teacher's instructions and materials allowed them to understand key aspects of the course; enabling them to make good progress, culminating in the submission of a well-researched, logically structured essay.

In detail, the survey required students to list the process of academic essay writing they deemed to be the most difficult.

The results, unsurprisingly, revealed the body followed by the introduction were perceived as being the most challenging. One possible reason could be that most students have had little or no prior experience writing such structured pieces, certainly not in a foreign language. The likely reason for most students choosing the body could be because most time and effort are spent on this section. A few students chose the research process which is probably a result of not being familiar with the resources in their university library, and, again, being unaccustomed with research requirements and conventions. Furthermore, the possibility that students missed research guidance lessons should not be discounted.

The follow-up questions revealed other interesting possibilities. It is clear the vast majority of students see academic writing as a worthwhile endeavor and were mostly happy with the examples that were created through the classroom tasks (posted on the GMS Moodle site). The majority of students also saw the skills acquired in this course as having lasting value; beyond their university days. This was a particularly positive result as students sometimes forget the value of these skills and neglect to hone them accordingly. Finally, it is clear from the survey results that students were not just able to understand the materials, but also found them useful and relevant.

In terms of research, many students have probably not had much experience in autonomous research collection. It is quite likely that in previous assignments they have probably been given or told which reading materials they should cover. Learning to go out into the field and conduct searches using library resources takes some getting used to, even in the age of online search engines and databases. This could provide answers as to why a few students found the task difficult:

“Academic literacy skills can pose challenges when first introduced. To conduct research, students must learn to search for, and evaluate sources in terms of credibility and reliability, developing skills of informational literacy” (Tardy and Courtney, 2008). And, in the internet age, this can be especially tricky, particularly for students unaccustomed to conducting research and doing so in a foreign language.

While the test group was quite small, it still provided useful data. A longitudinal study eliciting more detailed responses could provide further insight into why certain choices were made, especially regarding the perceived lasting value of skills learned through academic writing.

Context

So, how should the teacher approach academic writing instruction? To begin with, the teacher should be able to transmit the importance of academic writing to students and provide them with a relevant context for their writing. Pineteh, argues that academic writing “is critical not only for socializing students into discipline-specific writing but also for their cognitive development” (2013: 14).

All too often students decide on a topic which seems interesting at first glance. Yet, what some students fail to understand is the topic’s limitations in terms of research possibilities. On the other hand, some students choose a topic that covers well-trodden ground: a topic that perhaps their friends or peers have written about recently. However, simply going through the motions in academic writing courses can lead to boredom. Therefore, it is paramount that the teacher encourages the students to brainstorm possibilities before settling on one. A good way to help them narrow their focus is to introduce the idea of relevance into their choice making repertoire. Some topics can seem too random and isolated, which can ultimately lead to writer’s fatigue. To counter this, the teacher may wish to have the students brainstorm topics they have recently encountered in other classes. Once the students identify the symbiotic nature of a topic and the broader relevance it may have, it is far more likely to engage the students in a more profound manner:

“Teachers need to provide learners with opportunities to write about topics that are relevant to their lives, to participate in various writing activities, and to feel that their writing has value” (Bello, 1997).

By encouraging students to choose a topic that is somewhat familiar and one which is relevant to their main area of study, the teacher can reduce the likelihood of students changing topic once they realize its limited research potential. If they understand the benefit of choosing a topic which is complimentary to their main area of study, then the student is far more likely to continue. However, rather than suggesting topics, the teacher should instead explain the limitations or possibilities of the ideas students generate themselves. The concept of teacher acting as guide and the student as epistemic voyager is, according to Piaget, how true learning takes place:

“Learning in terms of experience is therefore not due to pressure passively felt by the subject but to the accommodation of its assimilation schemes” (Piaget, 1971: 108).

So, to reiterate, it is vital that students acquire the knowledge of paragraph building themselves, rather than be given examples which they can simply copy. As in spoken language, simple mimicry does not necessarily lead to understanding; even though the sounds may seem quite accurate, if the speaker has no idea what the words mean or what impact they may have, then real learning has not taken place. For similar reasons, imitating also has little lasting educational value in writing courses.

Simplification

Another potential stumbling block when trying to maintain students' interest in an academic writing course is the over-reliance on jargon. Inundating students with new terms and vocabulary when they are just beginning their intellectual inquiries can be needlessly burdensome. Simplification of instruction is, therefore, fundamental to maintaining students' interest. Instead of referring to elements of language as 'thesis statements', etc. at the beginning of the course, the teacher may wish to simplify and introduce such technical terms later, possibly as extension activities. This will prevent students with being overloaded with potentially confusing names and titles, and obviate the need for the teacher to offer multiple explanations, instead relying on the examples (created in group work) to demonstrate paragraph structure for themselves. As the students become aware of, and familiar with, transition signals, they should instinctively know when new topics are being introduced.

Familiarizing and Consolidating

An excellent way of introducing, reinforcing and consolidating structural knowledge is by using information-set activities. An information set can be defined as a set of textual data, in this case an introduction paragraph, which has been deconstructed at the sentence level. Students are then expected to reconstruct the paragraph by using appropriate methodology.

An academic essay introduction can be tricky for some students as they inevitably try to introduce key ideas at the first opportunity. Getting down to business seems to be uppermost in their minds. Therefore, having the students reorganize examples into coherent full texts can be of lasting benefit. Simply by deconstructing several introductions into single sentence form (topics can be very different or quite similar depending on capability) and then have students, in groups, reassemble the sentences according to methodology previously explained by the teacher. Doing this physically, i.e. on large sheet of paper will allow students to understand the formation procedure of introduction writing and should have a more profound retention impact than a simple numbering activity. Such activities are also collaborative in nature, allowing for mutual peer development and learning.

Easily differentiated activities

These reassembling exercises can help students understand structure, with a particular emphasis on logical sequence. The teacher should choose at least three paragraphs and deconstruct them into individual sentences. The students will be expected to put the three different paragraphs together in a logical order. Subsequently, students should be able to explain their decision making rationale to the class. This activity will work well as a consolidation exercise after the students have been previously shown example sections. After successful completion, the students will have an exemplar, which can then be used throughout the course as a reference. Furthermore, by working with their peers, the task serves as an ideal way to have all students achieve the same level of understanding at the same time with the students guiding each other.

Such activities can allow students to become cognizant of the use of signal markers in English writing. Transitions are "explicit linguistic devices to signal relations between sentences and parts of texts" (Connor, 1996: 83). Once accustomed to their use in information-set activities, students should then be able to apply the same methodology to their own paragraphs, which can also broaden their understanding of signal device usage.

Engaging in such activities allows students to become cognizant of logical order and aware of which signal devices are necessary for the formulation of meaningful paragraphs. Only through experiencing can students

then apply the rules to their work in a way that reinforces and maximizes understanding. These activities can also be adapted and used for body paragraphs as well as conclusions.

Recording and Organizing

Another important point is to encourage students to keep vocabulary lists of new words and phrases. This is crucial as they will inevitably become exposed to new ideas and phraseology as their research progresses. It may be assumed that students will already possess a reasonable understanding of the general area, especially if they are working on a topic familiar to them from their major field. If the students have chosen a topic closely connected to their major subject, this will be of particular benefit as they will be learning new vocabulary and terms in English, terms and vocabulary which they probably have already acquired in their native language. Once the students are able to adequately plan and organize ideas, then they will be ideally placed to commence composing their papers:

...metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning and organizing) have been proven to be beneficial in learning unfamiliar content by low-proficient learners (Ching, 2002).

Of course, in order to write a logically structured and meaningful academic paper, students need adequate vocabulary. The teacher should, therefore, encourage students to keep a log of all new vocabulary they come across both from their research and during classroom activities. This will allow the students to build up a good reference bank, which they can access while writing their papers. Again, the reassembling activities implicitly contain example phrases and terminology crucial to academic writing compositions, so students are regularly guided toward acquiring useful language.

Maintaining Enthusiasm

Employing a systematic approach can keep the students focused and also allows students to feel that task completion is well within their grasp. By constantly engaging students in relevant activities and continually reinforcing skills learned, the teacher can maintain a workable pace and ensure all students develop at similar rates. The teacher can also maintain students' interest and motivation.

The reasons why students withdraw from classes are manifold. Yet, a recurring complaint in academic writing classes at Komazawa University is that some students feel producing a 1500-word academic paper is simply beyond them. Yet, as onerous as it may initially sound, academic writing does not have to be beyond any student, even those possessing average writing skills. If enthusiasm is maintained, students will be able to learn how to use specific writing devices through relevant activities in order to consolidate understanding. Teachers must strive to create "a program of instruction which provides students with a series of planned learning experiences to help them to understand the nature of writing at every point" (Seow, 2002: 316).

Again, the use of information-set activities allows for both learning through practice and exemplar generation; consequently, maximizing overall understanding. Once students can identify the logic in paragraph construction, producing well-structured paragraphs will seem eminently more achievable.

While producing an academic essay in its final form is, ultimately, a task to be completed individually, the journey need not take place in isolation. Instead of working hermetically, students will benefit greatly from peer input and group work which will generate fresh perspectives on their chosen topics. Students taking the compulsory courses at Komazawa University (GMS), are encouraged to discuss their topics during oral communication classes (OC III & IV). In addition, they may also have the opportunity of giving presentations. These are excellent ways to augment information already gathered as well as testing their theses out

in the public arena. It may also spur the students on to pursue further inquiry or challenge previously held assumptions.

Developing Main Points

Ensuring students are capable of developing their points into well-formed, coherent paragraphs takes practice. Yet, again, by simplifying the methodology into an uncomplicated model, students will be able to master this skill in a relatively short period. The model below demonstrates an easy to follow pattern for developing points:

Topic sentence of the paragraph

- 1) Give a reason: What is the (first, second, etc.) reason for the controlling idea?
- 2) Give evidence: What is an example of the reason?
- 3) Give an explanation: What do 1 & 2 mean and why are they important? (Student explains in their words)

Concluding sentence

(Adapted from Chin & Reid, 2012: 15)

Once students are familiar with the general thrust of this model, they can usually write good paragraphs regardless of their writing ability. Again, the dataset activity may be used here and differentiated accordingly. Students will be able to identify the transition markers and apply the same system to their own papers. Such activities can also provide excellent opportunities for peer-reviewing sessions.

Such tasks will not only provide the students with a model or exemplar, but will also maximize learning and cognition through active participation. As Piaget pointed out, it is through experiencing that learning takes place (1971). While he may have been referring to early learners, young adults can also benefit from such an epistemic approach.

Avoiding Plagiarism

“The subsequent decision-making process that leads to a thesis can seem confounding. Only with sustained practice can anyone know for certain if one has produced a workable thesis, a relevant piece of evidence, and a valid concluding idea. The longer and more complex the paper, the more challenging this whole scenario and the easier it is to choose plagiarism when an actual paper comes due” (Bethany, 2016: 1047).

On a final note, incidences of plagiarism will also be reduced once the students are familiar with the simple model for developing points mentioned above. Once the students understand that after they have used a source or quote and have explained the significance of the quote, they will then be expected to comment using their own words rather than simply relying on source material. Plagiarism issues can be reduced or even “solved by starting research strategies early and then spiraling discussions and learning experiences throughout the writing program” (Reid, 2006: 88-89). By allowing plenty of time and practice to correct citation use, the teacher can be confident that students will understand what is required. This skill needs to be cultivated early and continuously reinforced because, if left unchecked, students may simply look upon academic writing as a course in which they are expected to find source materials to insert into an essay without comprehending the fundamental reasons why they are required to do so. Bethany (2016), writes extensively

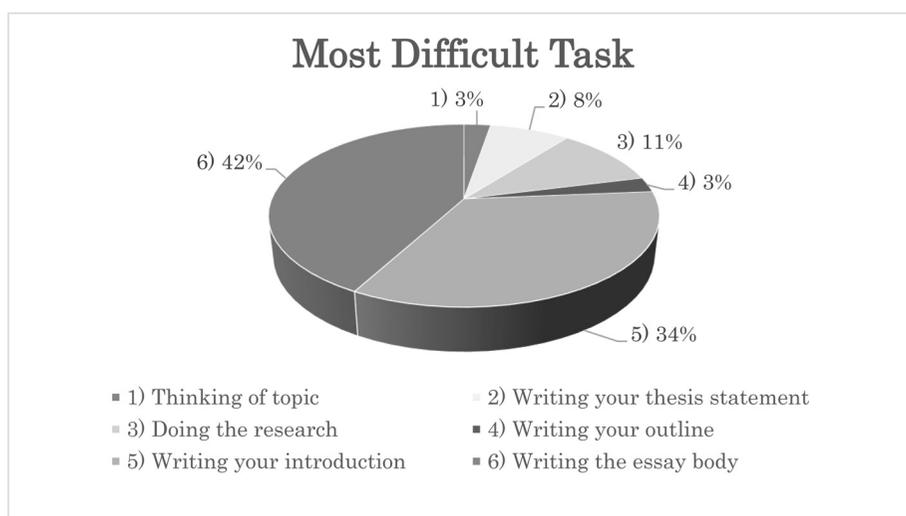
about plagiarism avoidance and concludes that, with non-native speakers, the problems are due to insufficient grammar and vocabulary and can be addressed by clear and consistently reinforced guidance.

Conclusion

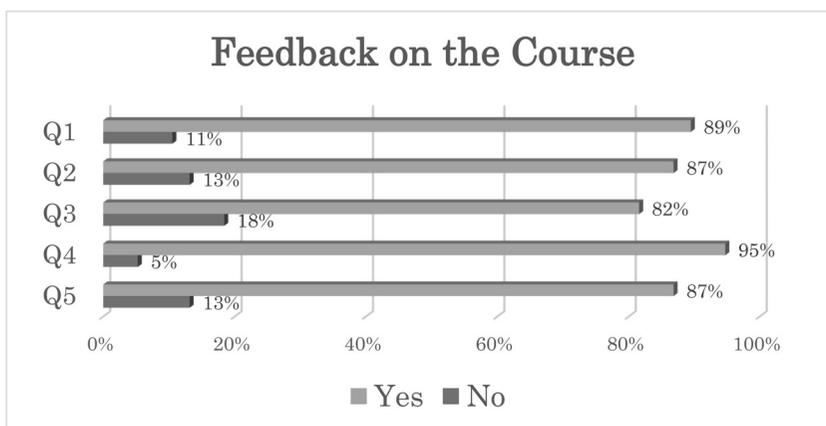
By adopting strategies mentioned in this paper, teachers should be able to create an environment where students can thrive. Having students develop writing strategies through relevant and, wherever possible, collaborative tasks will greatly enhance understanding. The rather lazy method of simply providing examples for students to copy deprives students of essential independent learning experiences. Choosing activities that enable students to form working examples is key to helping students develop the ability to write well-formed papers. Cultivating excellent organizational strategies, be they in writing or otherwise, is a cornerstone of university academic life and should be fostered at every opportunity. Finally, when students see the wider relevance of what they are achieving in academic writing courses, as well as the complimentary nature of their work, this will hopefully provide the motivation for further inquiry. Academic writing courses demand a place in any university language program and it is incumbent on instructors to provide the best guidance possible.

Appendix

Total Number of Respondents: 38 students



		Yes	No
1	Do you think your writing has improved by taking this course?	89%	11%
2	Do you think you have improved your vocabulary?	87%	13%
3	Do you think the skills you have learned in this class will be useful in the future?	82%	18%
4	Did you think the examples of introductions on the Moodle site/given by the teacher helped you understand how to write a good introduction?	95%	5%
5	Did the examples of how to develop your points help you understand how to write the essay body?	87%	13%



(Survey carried out in June, 2017 at Komazawa University among students from the Global Media Department)

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