Focus Discipline Research and the Internet: Literacy for College ESL Students

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This paper describes a high intermediate college ESL course that teaches reading, writing, and research skills using the Internet as a resource for sustained and focused content area study. The activities in this course are designed to provide these ESL students with a microcosm of the mainstream college experience. Students build reading skill and become familiar with academic discourse through their interactions with electronic texts representing a variety of mainstream disciplines. Each student chooses one of these content areas as a focus discipline and pursues in-depth study of that focus discipline over the course of the semester, articulating knowledge through a series of progressive written reports and a research project.

Background

Academic literacy, which encompasses ways of knowing particular content and refers to strategies for understanding, discussing, organizing, and producing texts (Johns, 1997), is key to success in college. To be literate in an academic sense, one should be able to understand and to articulate conceptual relationships within, between, and among disciplines. Academic literacy also encompasses critical literacy, that is, the ability to evaluate the credibility and validity of informational sources. In a practical sense, when a student is academically literate, s/he should be able to read and understand interdisciplinary texts, to articulate comprehension through expository written pieces, and to further knowledge through sustained and focused research.

Developing academic literacy is especially difficult for ESL students who are struggling to acquire and improve the language and critical thinking skills they need to become full members of the college mainstream community. The needs of these ESL college students may be met through the creation of a functional language learning environment that engages them in meaningful and authentic language processing through planned, purposeful, and academically-based activities, teaching them how to extract, question, and evaluate the central points and methodology of a range of material, and construct responses using the conventions of academic/expository writing (Pally, 1997). Effective academic writing requires that the student be able to choose appropriate patterns of discourse, which in turn involves knowing sociolinguistic conventions relating to audience and purpose. These skills, acquired through students' attempts to process and produce texts, can be refined over time by having students complete a range of assignments of progressive complexity which derive from the sustained and focused study of one or more academic disciplines.

Sustained content area study is more effectively carried out when an extensive body of instructional and informational resources, such as is found on the Internet, is available. Through its extensive collection of reading materials and numerous contexts for meaningful written communication and analysis of issues, the Internet creates a highly motivating learning environment that encourages ESL college students to interact with language in new and varied ways. Used as a resource for focus discipline research, the Internet is highly effective in helping these students develop and refine the academic literacy so necessary for a successful college experience.

Used as a tool for sustained content study, the Internet is a powerful resource that offers easier, wider, and more rapid access to interdisciplinary information than do traditional libraries. Using

the Internet allows ESL college students to control the direction of their reading and research, teaches them to think creatively, and increases motivation for learning as students work individually and collaboratively to gather focus discipline information. By allowing easy access to cross-referenced documents and screens, Internet hypertext encourages students to read widely on interdisciplinary topics. This type of reading presents cognitively demanding language, a wide range of linguistic forms, and enables ESL students to build a wider range of schemata and a broader base of knowledge, which may help them grasp future texts. Additionally, hypermedia provides the benefit of immediate visual reinforcement through pictures and/or slideshows, facilitating comprehension of the often-abstract concepts presented in academic readings.

Academic research skills are often underdeveloped in the ESL student population making research reports especially frightening and enormously challenging. The research skills students need to complete focus discipline projects are the same skills they need to succeed in college courses. Instruction that targets the development of research skills teaches ESL students the rhetorical conventions of term papers, which subsequently leads to better writing and hence improved performance in college courses (Mustafa, 1995). Moreover, the research skills acquired through sustained content study and focus discipline research enable students to manage information more effectively, which serves them throughout their college years and into the workforce.

Course Description

Focus discipline research may be carried out in any subject area, from the humanities to the social and physical sciences, and activities and assignments are described in detail in Appendix 1. To illustrate the instructional approach, I will outline a unit on business, a major field of study for many students. In this unit, students are introduced to a number of business concepts, among them product development, consumer behavior, marketing utilities, and market targeting. After reading two print texts and responding to comprehension questions, students search the Internet to find information on advertising. To guide their initial Internet search, students apply the principles described on the web page *Thnking Critically about World Wide Web Resources* <http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/help/critical/> (Grassian, 1995) to evaluate the information presented on the *All About Marketing* <http://www.mapnp.org/library/mrktng/mrktng.htm> web site. The Internet search activity engages students in linguistic tasks (reading, vocabulary development, and interpretation of language structures) and in research tasks (searching for, accessing, and evaluating information).

While the entire class studies business as part of the course, students who choose business as a focus discipline continue to research this subject area throughout the semester, reporting on their research in two short (i.e., two to three page) papers and one longer research project of five to seven pages. My students produce multiple drafts of each piece of writing, both long and short. They learn how to cite the sources they have used to prepare the paper, both within the body of the text, as well as in a bibliography at the end of the text. Students receive both peer and instructor feedback, and with each subsequent revision, work to express themselves more fluently, clearly and correctly.

Students who choose business as a focus discipline use the Internet to gather information on the following topics: (1) Basic principles in business and marketing, (2) Psychological factors involved in advertising, (3) The development of Internet commerce, detailing how the Internet has changed the face of sales and marketing. In their first paper, students define and explain the role of marketing utilities and the law of supply and demand in determining the success of a business. In their second paper, students discuss how advertisers use the basic determinants of consumer behavior in designing product advertisements. As students conduct Internet research, they actively practice searching for, sorting through, and organizing related pieces of information. The written projects encourage them to think critically about information while introducing them to rhetorical conventions common to business and building their linguistic and discipline-specific knowledge in preparation for a longer research report. This research report asks them to explain how the Internet has changed the field of sales and marketing, describing the advantages/disadvantages of selling/buying products over the Internet.

Because technology plays an integral role in my ESL curriculum, I have designed a web site located at http://kccesl.tripod.com/ as the information hub for the course. The site contains links to pages that provide information on materials, online tools, and learning resources used in the course. The site also provides an online venue through which students may share their work with a global audience. With students' permission, their written work is published on the course web site so that all students may not only learn from each other, but may also engage in an interactive dialogue that continues even after the course has ended.

This course has proven very successful in raising course pass rates (to 92%), thereby enabling students to exit the developmental English sequence and become full members of the college mainstream more quickly. Students find the Internet adds a motivating and valuable component to the course. Overall, student feedback on the course has been quite positive, with students noting improved confidence in their ability to interact critically and analytically with academic material.

Appendices

- Appendix 1
  Activities and assignments are described in detail.
- Appendix 2
  This page illustrates the entire step-by-step process of what students are supposed to do, not just the assignment.

References

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