

# Content Based Academic Writing

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This paper presents the second part of the "Writing Course Project" designed and implemented at the Trakya University E.L.T. Department. The main aim of the project is to design a two-year (Preparatory and Freshman) writing course syllabus based on the students' perceived academic needs. The theoretical assumption which emphasises a combination of product and process oriented approaches are taken into consideration for both courses.

## The Background and the Objectives

The objectives are determined to be as follows:

- to find out students' linguistic and academic needs, their writing habits and learning strategies,
- to produce materials applicable to the design of writing courses in ELT departments,
- to suggest procedures for testing and evaluation.

In line with the first objective, the students' linguistic and academic needs are determined; Firstly, when the preparatory year students' needs are inquired, it is seen that they need to be trained according to the requirements of C.A.E. Writing Test. Because in the preparatory year they are trained in basic language skills and grammar, involving five hours of writing instruction per week. At the end of the year, they take a proficiency test at the level of C.A.E. Test. Therefore, for needs analysis, the task types of C.A.E. writing test are examined. It is decided that a Task-based approach to writing would facilitate the achievement of our goal for the first year. Because a task-based syllabus is assumed to enable our students to work in a learner centred environment where they can monitor their own learning and keep an eye on their progress in L 2 as a whole.

Therefore the issues to be stressed in the first year's syllabus are agreed to be:

- learner centeredness
- development of lexis and syntax
- development of writing skills

During the second year (freshman year), which is our main concern in this article, the students follow typical freshman courses in foreign language teaching departments, involving three hours of writing instruction per week. The freshman year's writing course is based on the preparatory year's course.

For needs analysis, when the requirements of the ELT Department are examined, it is seen that;

Exam questions require essay type writing which demand knowledge demonstration and, Academic courses require academic skills like; note-taking, recalling, sorting, synthesizing, organizing, interpreting and applying information .

Thus, it is decided that a content-based approach to writing would be beneficial for the students. In a content-based approach, writing is required as a mode of demonstrating knowledge and as a mode of prompting independent thinking, researching and learning. Students learn to gather and interpret data according to methods and standards accepted in their fields, to bring an increasing body of knowledge to bear on their interpreting, and to write in specialised formats. Shih describes the characteristics of content-based approaches to academic writing as follows:

Writing tasks which follow from, and are integrated with the listening and reading of academic material is the defining characteristic of content-based approaches to academic writing.

May Shih, 1986 TESOL QUARTERLY

In a content-based approach; the emphasis is on writing from sources (readings, lectures, discussions), on synthesis and interpretation of information to be studied in depth. The focus is on what is said rather than how it is said. The skills are integrated as in a university course. Extended study of a topic precedes writing so that there is active control of ideas and extensive processing of new information.

Therefore, the following needed to be stressed in the syllabus:

- raising awareness on the audience
- raising awareness on coherence
- raising awareness on the importance of reading
- developing academic writing skills (outlining, summarising, reporting and arguing, paraphrasing and synthesizing)

The writing course is also seen as an opportunity to provide basic theoretical information related to writing. Therefore, reading input is deliberately chosen from the academic articles written by the professionals in the field.

Thus, the objectives of providing particular type of reading input can be listed as such:

- supplying the necessary materials for the students to build up their schemata in order to write better essays
- giving the students some theoretical knowledge about writing from which they will later on benefit
- limiting the topics provided through the reading input to what is relevant to their interests, rather than presenting them to general topics found in every writing book in the market
- facilitating their lexical and syntactic development providing typical and authentic samples of the genre they are dealing with as models
- raising their awareness on the issues such as the differences between written and spoken language, importance of reading for efficient writing, audience-readership and coherence, etc.

The syllabus is designed to cover the following academic writing skills:

- Reporting: Questionnaire
- Organisation : Making outlines
- Text Analysis
- Reporting : Making diagrams, tables and charts
- Reviewing: Genre analysis
- Synthesising and arguing
- Editing

## **Implementation and Evaluation**

In the particular implementation of the course, certain beneficial strategies such as revision and multiple drafting, critical evaluation on the part of the students are encouraged. Both to encourage the students for these strategies and to test the objectives of the course, the students are given assignments before the instruction and before the reading input; and when the teaching, reading, discussion cycle is completed, the assignments are given back and they are asked to evaluate and revise their own work and sometimes their friends' work, and the differences are noted. The students are frequently given individual feedback.

They also responded to a questionnaire on their conceptions of academic writing, their awareness of the importance of writing for the department, and their preferences and writing strategies. The same questionnaire is developed and given again at the end of the year to check upon the achievements of the objectives of the course. The students are also given a short written exam to measure their theoretical knowledge gains from the reading input.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Tests and Assignments**

I. The first major evaluation was done on outlining. The mean was 57.14, sd:25. The mean was lower than expected despite the fact that the class reviewed the paragraph and essay structure on an additional session. Therefore, the students were given feedback in the class on the hierarchical order of their outlines.

II. The second group of data comes from the revisions of the essays written before and after the reading input. Significant increases were found on content scores by 24% and in vocabulary by 20%. However, the organisation scores were decreased by 15%, suggesting that the students were not capable of managing the integration of the incoming information into the existing text.

The findings suggest that the reading input effected the students' essays positively, and the students adapted certain characteristics of the articles without any need for explicit instruction. The problem of informal language use in the students' essays for example, was thus eliminated both by exposing the students to texts written on that particular topic and by exposing them to academic articles written in a formal style.

III. The third group of data comes from the several summary scores, such as summaries written before the instruction, under exam condition, as assignments and revision of the summaries written before the instruction. The scores improved in the assignments (73%) as compared to summaries written under exam condition (53%) and remained nearly same in the revisions (72%). However, when the initial summaries (38%) and the final scores are compared (73%), the increase is significant and satisfactory. The students as well, comparing their initial summaries with the later ones acknowledged the increase in their individual performances.

IV. The last group of scores comes from the final assignments in which the students used several different articles to write on a topic in an extended essay. The mean score (65%) was found lower than expected. The students reported that the articles were more difficult than the previous ones and they had not practiced writing such an extended essay before.

## **The Results from the Questionnaire**

The students found four of the 14 texts difficult and hardly accessible. They found all the texts as relevant to the course, but only a few as interesting. However, they admitted that they were informative. 64% of the students thought that reading the materials improved their knowledge about writing, ELT, study skills and their English. They also accepted the idea that a selection of materials from different sources was good if they are not too difficult. However, they thought a text book would be beneficial for reference and revision.

There was a general satisfaction (85 % on the whole) with the lecturer's method, knowledge, clarity and efficiency. They perceived the feedback sufficient but they commented that they benefited more from the individual appointments with the lecturer (74%).

In the third part in which the learning outcomes are considered, the students felt that they had eventually acquired all the skills and they perceived revision as a beneficial strategy to see how much they improved (74%). The students also reported that there was not much variety in the subjects studied, all materials were about similar topics; writing, language, and ELT. Therefore there was little room for creativity.

The third part of the questionnaire reveals certain learner characteristics and the changes in these since the beginning of the year. The majority of our students (84%) still prefer individual work, they learn better from the instructor, a few of them ask for a friend's help, they do not like peer revision although they reported that they found it beneficial to criticise each other's work when done appropriately.

## **The Last Check of the Objectives**

The students were given a short exam at the end of the year in order to measure their theoretical gains from the readings done in the course. The students' performances ranged from 89% to 63% on the readings that they perceived as accessible, on the others they performed between 58% to 42%. It seems that the students had understood some of the texts better than the others depending on their difficulty level.

## **Suggestions**

Our findings from all the above mentioned sources suggest that there are certain aspects of our syllabus to be retained and some

others to be reviewed.

We correctly suggested that reading input would facilitate the acquisition of certain aspects of academic genre leaving no need for explicit instruction. It facilitated their lexical and syntactic development, articles provided models for the students, the issues discussed in the raised their awareness. However, it is clear that the reading input although it should be selected from the relevant genre, it should not be too difficult for the students and require more background knowledge than the students have. The selected articles might be chosen from the field of ELT, but they should relate to the different aspects of the field so that the course would have variety and raise the students' interest while preparing them for their future studies. Although it is quite difficult to make an academic writing course interesting for the students since its requirements are predetermined, the students should find opportunities for self expression and reflect their self interests at least at times. Therefore, the students can be engaged in voluntary project works and can be encouraged for occasional presentations on the topics they chose.

Students should be introduced to strategies such as revision, peer feedback, critical evaluation and group work gradually and the lecturers should show the students the beneficial sides, since our students seem culturally not inclined towards group work and critical evaluation.

It should also be taken into consideration that assignments and exams require different skills on the part of students. The students perform at different levels under two different conditions. Since answering to essay type of questions based on readings in a limited time is a fact of academic life, academic writing courses should involve practices and strategies to develop this skill as well. Mock-exam practices based on reading might be an idea.

Summarising and paraphrasing are difficult skills to acquire for our students since our secondary education does not emphasise them. These should be emphasised sufficiently and lecturers should make sure that their students are able to summarise and paraphrase yet, when the students work on the same skills for too long they lose their motivation. Therefore, a spiral rather than linear course syllabus might be designed to prevent this.

Our students seemed to have benefited from individual conferencing sessions they held with their lecturer. It seems that in such a cognitively and psychologically demanding course as academic writing, the lecturers should provide individual help to their students.

## References

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