

An integrated Approach to Develop Writing Skills of Final Year undergraduates of Law

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Abstract

For undergraduates of law, developing an ability to write fluently and confidently in English is a prerequisite for academic as well as professional advancement. The present study was conducted with the aim of designing an academic writing course for the final year undergraduates of law. For this purpose, the study investigated the effectiveness of pedagogy where the three major approaches to writing: product, process and genre-oriented approaches were combined with reading and study skills in English. A variety of research instruments was used in order to conduct a needs analysis and to test the effectiveness of a teaching programme to develop this ability. A combination of the main findings of the study as well as the insights gained in the literature review, are used to make suggestions for the design of an effective writing skills programme for undergraduates reading law.

Keywords: Undergraduates of Law, Academic writing, Integrated approaches to writing, English as a second language

Introduction

Writing is one of the four main skills of language learning, and is crucially important for second language (L2) learners. However, a large number of L2 learners cite writing as a difficult skill to acquire. This is partly due to the nature of writing itself. Writing is a complex process which proceeds through a series of episodes, such as thinking of what is going to be expressed, planning the text, transcribing, reviewing and revising. In fact, most of these operations will be taking place simultaneously, making the task of a writer even more complicated. Further, as it is meant to be communicated to an audience not immediately present and in some cases may not even be known to the writer, a writer has the added burden of ensuring that the written message is as explicit as possible. Hedge (1988) argues that effective writing requires

... a high degree of organisation in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers. (Hedge, 1988:6)

It is demands such as these which present particular problems to L2 learners. Therefore, the task of language teachers is “to find ways of helping [the] students to decide on their priorities and then agree on what the focus of a learning programme will be,” (Tribble, 1996:5). Even though there are a number of theories on L2 writing, L2 practitioners are yet to discover a coherent, comprehensive theory to foster writing proficiency of students of limited English proficiency. The main purpose of this article is to propose a theory for such students by integrating the three major approaches to writing: i.e. product, process and genre approaches, as well as reading and study skills in English.

Methodology

In order to design an effective writing skills course for the final year undergraduates of law, firstly, a needs analysis was carried out to discover the perceived needs of the students. It should be mentioned here that there were several points of view to be considered in the process of examining needs: namely, the students, language teachers and subject specialists. This study used multiple techniques of data collection such as questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, observations, writing samples of students and tests. It was believed that the use of a variety of methods would facilitate validation and triangulation of the data collected. In this study, there were two types of tests: a pre-test and a post-test, and these tests were used as the primary research tool. Other research methods were used mainly as checking mechanisms to triangulate the data gathered from the primary research tool. It should be mentioned here that before

the research instruments were administered to research subjects, they were used with a pilot sample so as to assess their quality. The information obtained from the pilot study was then used to revise the data collection procedures.

This research took the form of experimental research which was analytic and deductive. All experimental approaches involve the control or manipulation of the three basic components of the experiment: *the population, the treatment and the measurement of the treatment*. The pre-test consisted of a number of testing techniques such as finding the main idea, identifying cohesive devices, discourse markers, essay writing etc. to gauge the current language ability of the sample population. Following the diagnosis, the participants were given the 'treatment', in the form of instruction on writing, reading and study skills. After that, the effects of the treatment were evaluated by means of an achievement test and a post-instruction interview with a sample of the student population.

Three different types of questionnaires were distributed among the final year undergraduates of law, subject specialists and language teachers. The questionnaires consisted of open-ended, closed, and scaled questions modelled on the Likert scale. It should be mentioned here that only the completed questionnaires were analysed due to the fact all the questionnaires distributed could not be retrieved, and some were returned incomplete.

The researcher selected the semi-structured format for data collection as it would allow for greater flexibility as described above. The interview data were supplemented with audio recordings as well. Two stages of interviews were conducted with ten members of the sample student population; before the writing instruction and then immediately after the teaching programme. The aim of the pre-instruction interview was to see students' expectations of the writing skills course and the post-instruction interview served to gather students' perceptions of the teaching programme and their suggestions to improve such a programme in the future.

A focus group discussion was conducted with five language teachers to gather information about their perceptions regarding students' abilities and limitations concerning L2 writing and the teaching methodologies that can be used to develop their writing proficiency. Here, the researcher acted as the facilitator. A limited number of questions which were open in nature were used to avoid provoking a set response. Audio recordings were used to record the discussion.

As mentioned earlier, in this study, tests were used as the main method of collecting data on subjects' abilities in and knowledge of areas such as writing, reading and study skills. Seliger and Shohamy (1989: 176) define a test as "a procedure to collect data on subjects' ability or knowledge of certain disciplines". A number of testing techniques such as finding the main idea, identifying cohesive devices, discourse markers, essay writing etc. were used to collect language data. As mentioned earlier, a pre-test and a post-test were used to collect data on the current language abilities of the research subjects and the change after instruction.

Findings

The research data gathered from the variety of research instruments that were detailed in the earlier section provided useful insights regarding the English language needs of the student population under discussion. Given here are some of the major findings of the survey:

- Essays lacked proper organisation
- In some cases, content generation seemed to be a problematic area
- On most occasions, question title was misinterpreted
- Citation skills were very poor
- None of the essays paid any attention to academic conventions
- With regard to reading and listening skills, students had difficulties distinguishing the main ideas and supporting details, guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words using contextual clues, identifying the cohesive devices and discourse markers.

A writing course module was designed after taking into consideration the feedback gathered from the research instruments mentioned earlier. Since the main focus was on developing writing skills of the student population in question, the three main approaches to writing, product, process and genre-oriented approaches were selected. As a brief examination of the strengths and weaknesses of each writing approach demonstrated that these three approaches complemented each other and that teaching the three approaches separately may have resulted in unbalanced L2 writing instruction and performance, the researcher believed that writing instruction should combine these three approaches.

In incorporating the three approaches in the writing class, firstly, students were asked to brainstorm on a given essay topic individually. After that, they had to draft the essay in pairs/groups using the structure of an essay given by the teacher. This approach helped students learn how to compose a piece of writing systematically by using the pattern-product techniques, use vocabulary and sentence structures for each type of rhetorical pattern appropriately and raise their L2 writing awareness, especially in grammatical structures. After the essay was written, the writers were asked to check whether all the components were included in the essay with the help of a checklist. Here, the students were encouraged to judge their own work because they

... often submit work without a thought as to what is good or bad about it or how it could be improved. They often overlook obvious errors, perhaps because they have not even read their own work before submitting it. (Gibbs & Habeshaw, 1989: 94-95).

After each pair/group checked the success of the essay according to the guidelines given, the essays were re-drafted. Then, it had to be reviewed by another pair/group. The main aim of the peer review was to check whether the essay was written using the appropriate academic conventions. As an extension of this activity, the students had to evaluate a few essays which had gained a poor grade, with the help of an essay marking key. A range of skills including analysis of essay titles, brainstorming, mind mapping, etc. were included in the writing module. A great deal of attention was paid to the structure of the essay. The students were asked to write short essays from time to time; firstly in groups, then in pairs and then individually. A variety of student groupings were used because students are generally more confident when they work in pairs/groups.

As mentioned earlier in the article, the main aim of conducting this research was to find an efficient strategy to improve the writing skills of final year undergraduates of law. Although taught as separate subjects in academic settings, reading and writing are inherently linked. There is a plethora of research to affirm that reading and writing abilities are complementary and growth in one skill inevitably leads to growth in the other; i.e. students become better readers by strengthening their writing skills and vice-versa. According to Rose et al (2003: 42)



... university students must be able to read complex academic texts with a high level of understanding, and be able to critically analyse such texts in order to present coherent analysis, argument or discussion in their own written work. They must also be able to structure their essays appropriately, using academic conventions and objective academic language, to demonstrate their mastery of a topic or inform and influence their readers.

The importance of integrating reading and writing is further emphasised by Smith (2001:1) when he states that “[f]or many years, reading and writing researchers have acknowledged the importance of the connection between the reading and writing processes”.

The reading strategies in the module included identifying the main idea and supporting details, cohesive devices, discourse markers and using contextual clues to guess the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. Activities such as these greatly improved the reading skills of the students. Towards the end of the course, they could answer questions based on a reading comprehension passage with a lot of success. Therefore, the researcher is of the view that in view of the complementary nature of the reading and writing processes as demonstrated above, integrated reading-writing instruction should be implemented in the L2 writing classroom to improve the writing skills of law undergraduates.

The next crucial area is the development of study skills which includes “adjusting reading speeds according to the type of material being read, using the dictionary, guessing word meanings from context, ... note-taking and summarising” (Jordan, 1997:6). Researchers have consistently reported a positive relationship between academic success and study skills. Waters and Waters (2001:375) draw attention to the fact that “effective study uses the successful use of techniques such as how to take notes, skim and scan, construct a bibliography and so on”. Beard and Hartley (as cited in Jordan, 1997, p.8) conclude that “students need to develop effective study skills if they are to become effective independent learners”. Even though study skills seem to be separate from language skills, Exhibit A (adapted from Jordan 1997:9) demonstrates the integrated relationship of the skills. This demonstrates that in order to devise an effective writing course, language skills and study skills should be integrated and that such training will not only equip students with the language skills needed in academic courses but also foster independent learning.

Exhibit A Integrated Relationships of Language Skills and Study Skills

STUDY SKILLS				
RECEPTIVE SKILLS			PRODUCTIVE SKILLS	
LECTURE SEMINAR TUTORIAL	<u>LISTENING (& NOTE-TAKING)</u> 1. Differentiating: (a) main idea & supporting details (b) fact & opinion (c) idea & example 2. Use of abbreviations		SEMINAR TUTORIAL	<u>SPEAKING</u> 1. Initiating (e.g. presenting a paper) (a) introduce, conclude (b) define, classify, summarise, compare, contrast, etc. 2. Initiating & responding (e.g. taking part in a seminar discussion)
PRIVATE STUDY	<u>READING (& NOTE-TAKING)</u> • Intensive reading, skimming, scanning 1. Differentiating: (a) main idea & supporting details (b) fact & opinion (c) idea & example 2. Use of abbreviations		ESSAY REPORT DISSERTATION THESIS EXAM PRIVATE STUDY	<u>WRITING (other than note-taking)</u> a. General, i.e. introduce, conclude, summarise b. Specific academic concepts/functions e.g. define, classify, summarise, compare, contrast, etc.

Adapted from Jordan, R.R. (1997). *English for Academic Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

“In general, it is a good idea to get students’ reactions to lessons and their aspirations about them, clearly stated” declares Harmer (1998:22). In order to check the effectiveness of the teaching material used, the students were asked to compile feedback notes in groups. After each session, they were also asked to do activities based on that particular session in order to revise the lesson. Further, student writing samples were collected for analysis regularly and these showed a marked improvement. “Use a diary to record personal feelings, reflections and observations about your teaching as near to the time of the events as possible,” advises Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989:205). Hence, the researcher compiled observation notes, which focused on what was said and done by the students in the L2 writing class, immediately after each training session. These methods constituted the main source of information to gauge students’ development with regard to L2 writing skills and other skills needed for effective writing, and ultimately, to check the effectiveness of the teaching programme.

Limitations

The research was not devoid of limitations. A major limitation was the fact that due to various personal and academic reasons, the students were unable to participate in the teaching programme for a longer period. Therefore, the teaching was limited to two hour blocks per week for eight weeks. Another limitation was the fact that the study involved the writer in studying and evaluating her own teaching which would have resulted in a potential loss of objectivity at specific stages of the research, in terms of data collection and analysis. For instance, in interviewing the students after the training course, where the researcher acted as the interviewer, there could have been potential for the students to try to please the researcher who was the teacher and the designer of the teaching modules. Further, the decision to interview only ten members of the student sample before and after writing instruction could have had some effect on the data collected.

However, certain strategies were employed to minimise these problems. Firstly, the study used multiple data collection techniques, which allowed for a triangulation of data. Attempts to address bias in each data collection procedure were also made. For example, classroom observation was conducted not only by the researcher; feedback from the regular teacher of the class was also obtained concerning student behaviour. Interviews were conducted in two stages, prior to and after the training. Further, the transcripts of the interviews were shown to the students to be checked and amended if necessary. The writing scripts were marked by a group of teachers who were not involved in the study. Moreover, the feedback from students regarding the effectiveness of the teaching programme that was collected bore no names and had to be compiled in groups. Taking the above into consideration, despite some of the limitations this project may still have, the researcher strongly believes that the results of the study will help in establishing a successful L2 writing pedagogy for the final year undergraduates of law.

Conclusion

This study probed the feasibility of synthesising the product, process, genre-oriented approaches to writing, reading, writing and study skills which would enable the final year undergraduates of law to handle writing assignments in other academic courses successfully. As emphasised throughout the study, teaching writing skills to non-native students is a challenging task for L2 teachers because there are a number of elements involved and also because the development of writing skills takes a long time. The researcher would like to stress the need to incorporate the insights of the above mentioned approaches, into the L2 writing class because the strengths of each approach can complement each other and help teachers to develop learners' writing competence by providing appropriate input of knowledge and skills in the writing procedure. The researcher is of the view that such a method has a lot of potential in the L2 writing classes as it takes into account almost all the aspects connected with the activity of writing. The researcher would like to conclude the discussion with the following quotation, which accurately sums up her teaching philosophy with regard to the integrated approach to writing:

The goal of every course should be individual student progress in writing proficiency, and the goal of the total curriculum should be that student writers learn to become informed and independent readers of their own texts with the ability to create, revise and reshape papers to meet the needs of whatever writing tasks they are assigned (Kroll 2001: 223).

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