Teaching Writing to Students with Diverse Writing Background

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Abstract

Teaching writing in an international university is rewarding because teachers cross paths with students from different walks of life. As such, it makes the English writing class more interesting because students come in with different writing experiences. This could be an issue, though, as teachers will need to meet the objectives of the course whilst attending to the different writing needs of the students. This academic article presents some pertinent issues for writing courses in an international setting. It is hoped that this paper will give insights to teachers who find themselves teaching in a similar setting.

Keywords: Teaching writing; diverse writing experiences; international students

Introduction

It was about a year into my career as a writing teacher in Thailand when I realized just how diverse my students' writing skills were. Working in an international university gave me the opportunity to cross paths with students from over thirty countries around the world, especially regions around Southeast Asia. Our diverse student body not only brought different English language varieties, but also diverse backgrounds in writing in the English language.

Typically, on the first week of classes, writing classes in the department would assess incoming students' writing and grammar level by administering a simple diagnostic test or assigning an in-class essay at the beginning of the semester. This gives insight into what grammar concepts need to be reviewed and serves as a guide in lesson planning. The results from this preliminary assessment provide a baseline of each student's writing competency as well, so that individual improvement can be checked as the semester progresses.

Being a university with a diverse student body, it is normal to find students who have extensive English writing experiences, and those who have minimal. Some students have actually never written an essay until they were in senior high; some of them had only written short paragraphs throughout their primary and secondary education; and some of them had never composed their own original work; instead, they had memorized essays in their writing classes. These experiences shared resonate with research done in the field of ELT (Ho, 2002).

Writing, as all of us have experienced, is an intricate skill (Ismail, 2011). Good writing requires an understanding of a genre, mastering correct language mechanics, and developing a personal voice, are just a few of the many processes a student needs to know. All of these plus an array of writing experiences adds up to the complexity of the teaching process. The following paragraphs will highlight some major issues found in the writing classroom, as well as some possible solutions.

Writing Issues and Possible Solutions

Application of Grammar Rules

The first issue is the failure to apply proper English grammar from students' textbooks or workbooks into a piece of writing. Textbooks for writing are typically made up of chapters organized according to different genres. There are a few readings to support the genre, and some specific grammar points are also presented,

along with some corresponding grammar exercises. Though the grammar exercises may be a useful activity, what we often observe is that the grammar lesson does not easily transfer into the students' written work. In other words, grammar rules which students may know in isolation may not be transferable to practical and contextual use. This is common especially in Thailand, where English language classes have been found to prioritize the teaching of discrete forms of the language (Foley, 2005). In fact, on a grammar quiz, students will be able to recite the grammar rule and apply it in an exercise. Yet, they will continue to make the grammar mistake in their essay writing, where the grammar exercise is no longer the focus.

Some of the problematic areas found in my students' writing are:

• Articles.Most Asian languages do not use articles, hence learners have a difficult time deciding which article, if any, to use (Shintani & Ellis, 2013)
• Verb tense. Many Asian languages, including Thai, do not add tense markers to verb to indicate time. Instead, a word indicating time is added.
• Prepositions. Small words are hard to learn, and perhaps equally hard to teach. When should you use *to, for, in, on*? These words do not have as much concrete meaning attached to them as do nouns and verbs.
• Sentence structure errors. Fragments, faulty parallelism, and run-on sentences are frequent errors from all L2 writing backgrounds..
• Word-choice. For example, students often write "in the bad way" or "do the bad thing" or other similar constructs.

Corrective Feedback for Grammatical Errors

To help students identify errors in grammar, or in their writing, feedback is typically provided. Feedback, on another hand, is an issue. First, questions of the value of corrective feedback in writing have intensified in the past decade or so with Truscott's (1996) controversial paper on the ineffectiveness of corrective feedback. Though Truscott's position on corrective feedback may appear quite radical, it has encouraged teachers to become more cautious about the type of feedback they provide. Second, direct feedback is almost always expected from the teacher, especially within the Asian cultural context. We have observed in our classes that students struggle in editing and revising their essays when indirect feedback is given.

From the ongoing discussion about corrective feedback, there are some considerations worth noting. First, writing teachers need to decide which feedback fits the best. There are several types of feedback a writing teacher can choose to give, such as being direct or indirect, focused or unfocused, or providing explanation on the margin, or even arranging for a personal conference with students. What a teacher should bear in mind is that the type of feedback chosen will affect students' learning process, as well as their motivation to write better. When a feedback does not encourage students to recognize why there are errors, then the feedback has not really accomplished anything.

Second, writing teachers must help their students realize that writing is not a one-off activity. Writing involves several steps. To illustrate this process, what we do in our English classes is have between two to three drafts for one writing assignment. During this process, we encourage our students to incorporate the suggested corrections on language mechanics, as well as content. Multiple drafts help students see their overall progress. We also make sure that students will not take the initial drafts of their essay lightly by scoring the first drafts. Furthermore, some of the teachers do not grade later revisions. This encourages students learn to revise and edit for themselves at the very beginning of the writing process. This allows teacher-generated revisions to be learning tool for future papers, rather than a grading component. The whole process of revision seems to help students become more aware of what they need to work on. Nonetheless, this does not equate to a higher level of grammatical accuracy.

Finally, students can improve their own writing as a group in class. This should be done anonymously to prevent embarrassment, but it appears that students enjoy working on each other's sentences or paragraphs, and everyone is motivated to try to correct the problem with their friends. The student-suggested corrections are typed in immediately so they can see the result, and if necessary, let students make further suggestions. We try our best to use each student's writing at some point, and mix in exemplary examples as well, so that this is not a negative experience, and as a way to encourage a sense of ownership in the learning process.

Academic Honesty

Another issue is academic honesty. In this region, it is a common practice for language learners to memorize essays. What encourages this practice could be the plethora of exemplar essays that are marketed to students sitting for a high-stakes exam. This poses a problem, as learners will be led to accept that using someone else's work can be passed as their own.

To date, plagiarism continues to present a problem for some of our students. Whether it is because they like to "cooperate" in learning here in Southeast Asia, face high parental pressure to excel (certainly an issue in many cultures here), do not understand the assignment and are afraid to ask for help, (again, this is culturally significant), have poor time-management skills, or are simply unmotivated, plagiarism must be dealt with almost every semester in writing classes. Moreover, the ease of using the Internet to find essays is certainly causing the problem to escalate.

Monitoring and Maintaining Academic Honesty

Thankfully, technology helps writing teachers to outsource the task of ensuring originality of students' work to other tools. Plagiarism checker programs are useful, but too expensive for small institutions. There are free online programs that do help to catch some plagiarism, but not all. If possible, teachers can try to prevent it from happening in the first place. One basic way is for the teacher to really get to know each student's level of writing. Having several drafts for an essay will help keep track on students' writing performance, and any suspicious inconsistencies can be identified by comparing different drafts. Nonetheless, when doing this, teachers need to bear in mind that students may have enlisted help with more proficient English writers.

Another approach is to teach students to cite correctly, so that they know the difference between plagiarism and proper citations and references. Assigning writing topics and supplying students with relevant references in the form of articles, newspapers, or books seems to reduce plagiarism, perhaps because it takes some pressure off from the students to come up with all the ideas and words themselves. Another method is to tailor assignments and the setting to make it almost impossible to plagiarize. For the final exam, we use a computer lab with the Internet disconnected and give specific writing topics on the spot, then monitor students as they write. This type of in-class writing on a teacher-generated topic is useful to prevent plagiarism and is important for a high-stakes exam, but it doesn't allow for longer writing assignments, creative choice of topics, and serious student editing.

Writing in the 21st Century

Most students will be required to work on a computer in their future careers, so writing directly on a computer, without handwriting first, is an important skill. Keyboarding is a challenge when many of the students have never typed in English. Many of our L2 students prefer hand-writing because of this problem. When students use the computer to write, we teach them to use features such as spell-check, how to format, and how to revise with cut and paste functions, and they quickly improve efficiency over hand-writing. One idea for a computer lab writing class is to have the students write an introductory paragraph, for example. Then ask them to highlight their attention-grabbing opening statement in red. Some of the students will search in vain for this feature, and they are then given time to write it in. Then they highlight the thesis statement in green, the background information in blue, and so on. This visual activity challenges them to focus on particular aspects of writing an essay, recognize what is missing, and immediately self-correct the problem before they move on to the next paragraph. This works especially well for the first essay of the semester.

Conclusion

Having a classroom with varying degrees of English writing proficiency may seem overwhelming. It is almost impossible for us to treat individual writers the same, yet, we need to ensure that every single student is moving along towards achieving our writing classes' learning objectives. Nonetheless, we hope that the issues we shared will help English writing teachers have an idea of what to expect when teaching students from different writing backgrounds.

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