The Challenges of Teaching Academic Writing

Preparing international students for the rigours or academic writing is no easy task. Clare Furneaux, a lecturer at the Centre for Applied Language Studies at the University or Reading, England, explains how it is done.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses prepare students to study in English. They put a lot of emphasis on academic writing since at most English-medium universities this is the dominant form in which students are asked to present their ideas. At undergraduate level in the UK, this means writing activities ranging from laboratory notes to extended essays of 10.000 words to three-hour (three essay) exams. Post-graduates also have to write 25,000-word dissertations or PhD theses.

EAP writing instruction in Britain often takes place before the students enter their academic departments, typically on summer pre-sessional courses. There is some in-sessional teaching, too, but not on the scale of composition courses in the United States. The major challenge is to prepare international students, with varying English proficiencies and from a wide range of cultural and academic backgrounds, to enter into a variety of academic departments at different levels of study. Students are often grouped according to language level for most of their programme, and then according to subject specialisation for some classes.

The EAP writing teacher, therefore, usually has a class that is determined by language level with a course aim to prepare them for their future academic writing needs in a variety of academic contexts. The students will often see their problem as primarily linguistic but they also need to learn how to produce writing that will satisfy the norms of the academic communities into which they wish to enter. This will involve reaching a satisfactory level of linguistic competence, as well as mastery of the academic writing conventions those communities follow. One difficulty here is that different academic disciplines have different conventions. The EAP teacher cannot know the conventions of all his/her students' specialisations. So, what is EAP writing and how do we teach it?

If students are to produce writing that will satisfy academic standards, they need to develop an understanding of what such writing involves. Many students (native speakers, too) have never been taught how to write; their schooling has given them a lot of writing practice, but the focus is usually on the product (what you produce) and not the process (how you produce it). Writing in a foreign language requires the transfer of skills from the mother tongue, where they exist, or acquisition of them in the foreign language.

Many EAP writing courses follow a "process" approach to the teaching of writing. This approach has been criticised for being too soft on students and for not preparing them for the real

academic world of critical readers, set topics and examinations. However. there is no reason why a process approach cannot prepare students for these things; its aims are to produce flexible writers who can tackle a task from a variety of angles. All academic writing requires this and, of all English-language students, those aiming for academic study seem to be the most motivated towards and the most capable of reaping the rewards of a process approach.

A process approach to writing emphasises generating ideas, organising and presenting them in an acceptable way and re-writing first/second drafts in the light of feedback from readers. The keywords here are "in an acceptable way" and this means, ultimately, acceptable to the academic community the student is going to join. This involves helping the students become aware that differences may exist between their previous experience of academic writing and what is now expected. They are encouraged to read appropriate texts to see how academic prose is constructed in English. They compare this with their own writing and read each others' work, offering constructive criticism (guided by the teacher through checklists and examples). The teacher writes on the same topic and the students see how he/she has tackled the task. After this, they write another draft, building on all the reading and discussion. Linguistic accuracy is left to the final

draft stage; students must sort out content and organisation before focusing on accuracy.

Topics and tasks for writing must be suitable for the future needs, intellectual level and maturity of the students. They must also be feasible for everyone in the class. This leads to a predominance of general topics that can be dealt with in a "pseudo-academic" way (eg international tourism), but building up to writing in their subject area (in the form of longer "projects", for example). Writers are asked to develop an argument, to define, to compare and contrast, to summarise, etc. They need practice in note-taking and incorporating material from other sources in their text without plagiarism. They must learn to organise extended pieces of writing and to write under time constraints. It is a lot to ask, and the feedback the writers receive is crucial in helping them come to terms with the challenge ahead of them.

Feedback comes at the drafting stage, giving students chance to incorporate the feedback into subsequent drafts. A variety of methods are used; sometimes it comes from peers within the writing class, as described above, and sometimes from the teacher.

Teacher-feedback may take the form of a one-to-one discussion about the writing. This is obviously time-consuming, but I have found even a few minutes' discussion in class, while other students work on a task, seems to motivate students and sort out any

misunderstandings more efficiently than other ways of providing feedback. Giving comments on an audio-tape is quicker and more personal than writing comments. Writing questions about content I do not understand or I think could be expanded. I also do on occasion. I also point out strengths as well as weaknesses and make suggestions about organisation and additions to the text.

This if far removed from the traditional highlighting of language error in red on the final draft. which now seems a huge waste of time, given the negligible improvements it produces. The improvements I now see in my EAP students' writing are impressive. They blossom, they write, they improve! And they feel they leave the EAP course well-equipped for the rigours of academic writing that lie ahead.