PROBING INTO ACADEMIC WRITING: BUILDING STUDENT’S CONFIDENCE TO WRITE

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ABSTRACT
Student’s responses are usually negative when invited to write, in the L2, anything from a paragraph to an academic paper in tertiary education. This is due to many different factors including the fact that students attending an ESP/EAP language course are usually of different language levels. The most difficult part of an ESP/EAP language teacher is to persuade students of the need to write in the foreign language and more specifically to write using the terminology of their discipline.
Providing students with a broad range of opportunities to write, thus facilitating their ability to discover the socially appropriate language structures necessary in their science, will aid students in their quest for more knowledge. One first step which should be taken by the ESP/EAP language teacher is to enable students to distinguish the different academic writing styles such as tentative, formal, informal and objective, etc. This presupposes, on the side of the students, a sound knowledge of grammar, syntax, spelling, etc, of the foreign language, and if students do not have this kind of knowledge then it is the teacher’s duty to make sure that she/he will start her teaching process with these basic language structures and that she/he will then move on to paragraph and summary writing, to processing, to interpreting and to synthesizing their material. This paper broaches the subject of writing and more specifically of academic writing in tertiary education, and probes into matters such as, for example, the techniques and approaches employed in the teaching of academic writing. It also looks at the techniques which are employed by ESP/EAP teachers to encourage their students to build their confidence in writing.

Key words: academic writing, building student’s confidence in writing

INTRODUCTION
When Greek students enter universities, in the country, they come into contact with texts, especially of their discipline, the language of which they do not understand fully both in their mother tongue and the foreign language, be it English, or any other foreign language. This is due to the fact that the terminology used both in their mother tongue and in the foreign language is unknown to them, especially in their first year of studies.
Nevertheless students are obliged to learn the terminology of their discipline, while at the same time they should also have a very good level of the foreign language, from as early as the first semester. Students are also expected to pass all four semesters of the foreign language before they receive their degrees. It becomes even more difficult for university students when they are asked to prepare research papers both in their mother tongue and in the foreign language. The use of terminology on the one hand and the specific academic genre on the other, especially in a foreign language, confuses students and causes headaches to foreign language teachers. So, how do we go about teaching both terminology and academic writing to our students?

The present paper will focus on our experience as ESP/EAP practitioners and material designers and in integrating Technical and Academic Writing into our English language courses with the purpose to provide our students with a wide range of opportunities for writing. These opportunities seem to be interesting and motivating for students and they also seem to facilitate their ability to find those socially appropriate language structures which are needed in the various situations they might face in their future professions.

ACADEMIC WRITING IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

Tertiary education ESP/EAP teachers in Greece usually teach to mixed ability classes. Therefore teachers who decide to integrate something new in their teaching should take into consideration theories which would help them to make their teaching easily understood, this includes student’s writing skills.

Helping Student’s Build their Writing Confidence

First year Greek tertiary education students seem to consider writing skills difficult – at the beginning – and not of interest to their profession. Research papers, are also not their strongest point as the research process itself is considered “a wicked tangle of requirements designed to trip up the novice and condemn her to note card hell” (Ballenger, B. and Payne, M., 2003)

Therefore, the ESP/ EAP teacher is called upon to build students’ confidence in writing. To make students believe that technical and academic writing is a skill that can be built systematically. To guide them towards an understanding that there is a close knit relationship between theory and practice in writing and that the teacher is there to help students understand this relationship.
Material Building – Text Construction

As it is very difficult to order books from overseas and to supply Greek University students with them, ESP/EAP teachers in Greece - were and still - are obliged to produce their own material to teach. This is due to the fact that budget allowances are very limited and books from foreign publishers usually cost much more than books produced locally. There is also a very limited market in Greece concerning material which deals with academic writing, as on the one hand ESP/ EAP teachers are not obliged to teach academic writing to their students, and on the other hand there are not many course books on the market, from Greek publishers, for teachers to use. Thus most ESP/ EAP teachers usually produce their own material from which they teach academic writing. We relied on Grabe and Kaplan, (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, 62) for the production of our material, who mention seven basic components which are necessary but which may also “coalesce as multiple interacting strands”. These are the following: (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, 62)

1. Syntactic structures.
2. Semantic senses and mappings.
3. Cohesion signaling.
4. Genre and organizational structure to support coherence interpretation.
5. Lexical forms and relations.
6. Stylistic and register dimensions of text structure.
7. Non-linguistic knowledge bases, including “world knowledge”

We should, nevertheless, stress that “within each of the aforementioned components there are numerous subcomponents interacting among themselves, as well as other components and subcomponents”. These according to Grabe and Kaplan (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, 62) are:

i. Elements of text structure which consist of four independent components, two on a sentential level and two on a textual level.
   a) At a sentential level we have syntax and semantics which are conceived as they are normally understood in linguistic theory (for example, the syntactic component involves types of clause construction and clausal combinations, the semantic component attempts to relate the linguistic form to objects and events in the phenomenological world, it will also account for semantic issues which can operate within the level of the sentence, for instance a negative marker will change the scope of interpretation of a sentence).

   b) At a lexicon level which in fact pervades all the other components as our mental lexicon affects and is affected by each of the aforementioned components (for example, our lexicon assists the syntactic component by providing sets of syntactically useful forms such as prepositions, articles, etc).
c) At a **textual level** in which cohesion and coherence are important.

**ii. A theory of coherence** according to which certain aspects of coherence are directly traceable to the text structure itself and other aspects are best seen as an interaction effect of the reader and the text information together. It is the coherence in the text structure itself that which allows the reader to build, at least in part, a mental model of comprehension (Singer, M., 1990)

**The functional-use dimensions of texts** according to which texts may be classified according to how they vary along two dimensions of text construction: text involvement/detachment and text integration/fragmentation. (Chafe, W., 1987, 383-407)

**iii.** Nevertheless a model of text construction needs to account for the following dimensions operating on the creation of texts : (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, 78-79)

1. **Rhetorical Intention** of writer.
2. **Interactivity** which combines those features which are relative to the interaction/involvement between the writer and reader of the text.
3. **Referentiality**, for example, a reference to a situation which takes place in a text.
4. **Immediacy of context** in an attempt to breed familiarity.
5. **Suasion** in an attempt to persuade the reader.
6. **Abstractness** in an attempt to show neutrality or objectivity.
7. **Elaboration** which refers to the degrees and types of elaboration which occur in different types of texts.
8. **Evidentiality** which refers to the writer’s degree of commitment to the factuality of what is being stated.
9. **Text type (genre)** which refers to the variation to be found among different text types and the way that textual features combine to define these types.

**WRITING APPROACHES**

It is important that Greek students do not disconnect what they had been taught about writing-as-a-process in junior and senior highschool and that they should be encouraged to apply what they had been taught about writing in their mother tongue in the second/foreign language as the basic principles remain the same. For the needs of our students we applied the following writing approaches which are based on Willis’s theory of writing: (Willis, J., 1996, 56-58)

i. **The theme-based approach which focuses on writing from sources and processing** (interpreting and synthesizing) reading course
materials having the students engage in reading, listening, and discussing before writing.

ii. The task-based approach which follows three stages:
   a) the “pre-task stage” in which the teacher gives the input, introduces and defines the topic, and highlights the ideas for writing.
   b) the “task stage” in which the teacher asks students to plan and perform the writing task in pairs or small groups, reporting the process of the task and the conclusion reached by the whole class.
   c) the “post task” stage in which emphasis is given on language (highlighting and working on specific language features from the task)
   d) By applying the approaches mentioned students seem to interact more and writing becomes more purposeful.

This, in combination with the process approach, seems to yield the best results in writing. The process approach focuses upon the following: (Grabe and Kaplan 1996, 87)

- the need to plan out writing as a goal-oriented, contextualized activity;
- intervention and pre-writing tasks, and multiple drafting with feedback between drafts;
- a variety of feedback options from real audiences, whether from peers, small groups, the teacher, through conferencing, or through other formative evaluation;
- free writing and journal writing as alternative means of generating writing and developing written expression, overcoming writer’s block;
- the idea that writing is multiply recursive rather than linear because as a process – tasks are repeated alternatively as often as necessary;
- self-discovery; and last but not least,
- student’s awareness of the writing process and of notions such as audience, voice, plans, etc.

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

Very often students tend to forget that what they are writing will be read by someone other than themselves. The reader may be their teacher, peers or other members of their writing workshop – their audience– who have been asked to read their work. Thus, a student must not only be aware of the writing process but must also be aware of his audience. His audience may become his most reliable “ally” as the variety of feedback options the writer receives from his real audience will aid him towards a better understanding of the writing process, and a realization that academic writing extends far beyond his individual writing needs but also concerns the “other” or “others” who may read his work. The role of the audience may not be a catalytic one and as Neufeld mentions “it is not claimed that the
students will magically be turned into great writers, but certainly they will get great help to learn the basics of technical and academic writing and then to apply these in different situations”. (Neufeld, G., 1987, 321-332)

**Genre**

For a writer to make meaning he needs language. Genre, as Kress mentions, plays an important role as it is an essential factor in language use, as all language use is a matter of making discourse. (Kress, G., 1989, 445-466.)

The making of discourse, as Grabe and Kaplan mention, "depends on differences between speaker and listener, or writer and reader”. (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, 136). As certain discourses become more deeply embedded in the social functioning of groups, these discourses become conventionalized; they become recognized as genres which serve functional purposes in communication. Genre should not be considered a “cure for all illnesses” as it is not prepared and presented to students for the purposes of instruction only. Tertiary education Greek students should understand that the study of genres opens up for students an awareness of the assumption of groups who use specific genres for specific ends, allowing students to critique not only the types of knowledge they acquire but also the ways in which knowledge is very important in the explicit instruction of students especially “in advanced writing development” as Swales mentions. (Swales, J., 1990).

**FEATURES OF TECHNICAL, PROFESSIONAL / RESEARCH AND ACADEMIC WRITING**

Greek tertiary education students are also confronted with texts which may contain scientific experiments, this writing style is known as the “scientific style” of writing. (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, 162) Nevertheless even a technical or a professional / research paper cannot avoid but reflect the cultural background of the individual who has written it. As Geisler so rightfully maintains (Geisler, C., 1995), the shaping of a written text by a writer reflects deeply embedded cultural and rhetorical assumptions about what materials may be presented, how those materials are to be organized, and how they may be represented in a maximally acceptable way, not necessarily in a way that is objectively most transparent. This writing constitutes not only a social act but an act falling within a total social construct.

Greek students, at this point, come to a realization concerning the writing of a research paper and that is that research papers don’t only follow a “knowledge canon” (Grabe and Kaplan 1996, 162) according to which they rely on previous science knowledge especially of other respected researchers but also that the language used in technical and professional / research papers is also specific. They realize that in tertiary
education they need more sophisticated language skills and this includes writing skills. What follows is an example of a task and how it is presented to our students.

**a. Comparison and Contrast**

One of the basic methods in scientific writing is the method of comparison and contrast. Scientists use this method to highlight similarities and differences among two or more items, ideas or viewpoints. Comparing—often although not always—focuses on the similarities of an item, while contrasting focuses on the differences. A comparison and contrast paragraph, like all writing, should have a good organization in order to be effective. This can be done in two ways: Point by point and whole by whole, contrast and comparison organization. (Trzeciak, J., and Mackay, S.E., 1994) The correct use of transition words (*but, however, although, likewise, similarly, besides, etc*) is very important especially in the second case as it helps to effectively bridge the ideas between or inside the paragraph and compare and contrast the same point in the same order.

**Task 1:**

Practice the above theory using the following material referring to the Chernobyl and Fukushima accidents. Use the *step by step* method to compare the Fukushima and Chernobyl accidents using the information bellow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Fukushima Daiichi</th>
<th>Chernobyl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date of accident</td>
<td>11 March 2011</td>
<td>26 April 1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident details</td>
<td>A magnitude-9.0 earthquake and resulting tsunami damaged the plant's power systems, causing cooling systems to fail. A series of gas explosions followed.</td>
<td>A sudden power output surge during a systems test caused a reactor vessel to rupture, leading to a series of blasts. An intense fire burned for 10 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity rating</td>
<td>Level 7 - major accident</td>
<td>Level 7 - major accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of reactors</td>
<td>Six; but only three of concern, plus pools storing spent fuel</td>
<td>Four; but only one reactor involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of reactors</td>
<td>Boiling-water reactors. Japanese</td>
<td>Graphite-moderated boiling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Authorities stress that unlike at Chernobyl, the containment vessels at Fukushima remain intact. Also, unlike Chernobyl, the reactors at Fukushima do not have a combustible graphite core. Water reactor. The graphite made it highly combustible. The reactor also had no containment structure and nothing stopped the trajectory of radioactive materials into the air.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Radiation released</th>
<th>370,000 terabecquerels (as of 12 April)</th>
<th>5.2 million terabecquerels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area affected</td>
<td>Officials say areas extending more than 60km (36 miles) to the north-west of the plant and about 40km to the south-southwest have seen radiation levels exceed annual limits</td>
<td>Contamination of an area as far as 500 km (300 miles) from the plant, according to the UN. But animals and plants were also affected much further away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuation zone</td>
<td>20km; 20-30km voluntary zone. Five communities beyond the existing evacuation zone have also been evacuated</td>
<td>30km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People evacuated</td>
<td>Tens of thousands</td>
<td>The authorities evacuated, in 1986, about 115,000 people from areas surrounding the reactor and subsequently relocated, after 1986, about 220,000 people from Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related deaths</td>
<td>No deaths so far due to radiation</td>
<td>A UN report places the total confirmed deaths from radiation at 64 as of 2008. Disputes continue about how many will eventually die</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term health damage</td>
<td>Not yet known, but risks to human health are thought to be low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current status</td>
<td>Officials say radiation leaks are continuing and could eventually exceed those at Chernobyl. The priority is restoring adequate coolant to the fuel ponds and the reactors themselves</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Among the residents of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, there had been up to the year 2005 more than 6,000 cases of thyroid cancer reported in children and adolescents who were exposed at the time of the accident, and more cases can be expected during the next decades</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Task purpose

The purpose of this task is:

- To help students organize information logically
- To develop the analysis of a particular topic by relating the similarities and differences among things

Task description (I)

Before starting to work on the task:

- To help students refresh the theory of comparison and contrast the teacher asks students to decide the way (Point by Point / Whole by Whole) one can develop a topic involving two or more items with similarities and differences.
- The teacher may also ask students to tell the transition words used in such a case and makes questions to check whether the students
have understood that comparing –although not always–focuses on similarities and contrasting on differences.

Task description II

- The task is conducted orally in the form of group or pair work as follows:

  **Group Work**
  The class is divided into two groups (A&B) with a different task each. Group A reads the information about Chernobyl and group B the information about Fukushima. The task requires that the two groups should use the written information in a discussion concerning the differences of these two events trying to prove which one was more destructive. The teacher checks that comparing and contrasting transition words are appropriately used and encourages students to participate in the discussion.

  **Pair work**
  (The same procedure may be used)

**Follow up**

- The students may be asked to use the information about Chernobyl and Fukushima and develop a comparison and contrast paragraph. They should begin with a topic sentence that states the main idea and then develop the rest of the paragraph to support the main idea, using either the point by point or the whole by whole method.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


