

REFORMING ESL WRITING INSTRUCTION IN TERTIARY EDUCATION: THE WRITING CENTRE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Writing in English is a difficult literacy to acquire in both first and second language contexts. Students must write reasonably well in English to succeed in university education. Yet, their lack of writing competence has been a perennial pain, and is affecting their academic and career advancement. This problem has motivated the quest for a more effective pedagogy for academic writing instruction. An alternative may lie with the Writing Centre approach, an established practice in North American universities, but not in Malaysia. This paper draws from a larger study on the applicability of the approach as writing pedagogy, learner support and an immersive environment. Due to space constraints, only the first application is discussed in this paper.

Introduction

The importance of writing literacy cannot be overstated, be it writing in the first or second language. Yet, students lack of writing skills remains a constant complaint, especially in the context of English as a second language (ESL) in university education (Manzo, 1999; Silva, 2001). This perennial problem has motivated educators and researchers to look for more effective instructional methods to teach academic writing in meeting university requirements. In the quest for an alternative pedagogy, Writing Centres (WCs) and Online Writing Labs (OWL), originating in North America, have been found to produce positive results (Bell, 2000; Carino and Enders, 2001; Lerner, 2003). The success of existing WCs seems to lie in the pedagogical approach of improve the writer, not the writing f (North, 1984), and the practice of non-directive and non-judgmental individualised student-centred one-on-one tutoring (Harris, 2000).

Against this backdrop, a survey study on writing needs and writing support conducted at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) found that both lecturers and students perceived the lecture method of instruction as the least effective and the

least preferred (Tan, 2006), and this finding was also affirmed by the Learning Pyramid research (see Figure 1) that the lecture method has the least retention rate of only 5%. The UPM lecturers and students instead preferred one-to-one tutoring if given a choice. However, the lecture method is still being practised by a good number of writing lecturers. This observation might account for the poor English literacy especially in academic writing among the students. The lecture method may be applicable for content courses, but for a skill course like writing, the one-size-fits-all factory pedagogy that disregards individual differences, has failed miserably. Unless the instructional method improves, the English literacy level of students might not have a chance to improve.

This, then, has instigated an in depth study on the WC approach that has been charting successes in North American tertiary education. Based on the secondary research on WC and OWL literature, the findings derived seem to suggest that the WC approach is a more effective methodology in teaching and learning writing skills for ESL students because it encompasses the relevant pedagogies and techniques of writing described in the following sections.

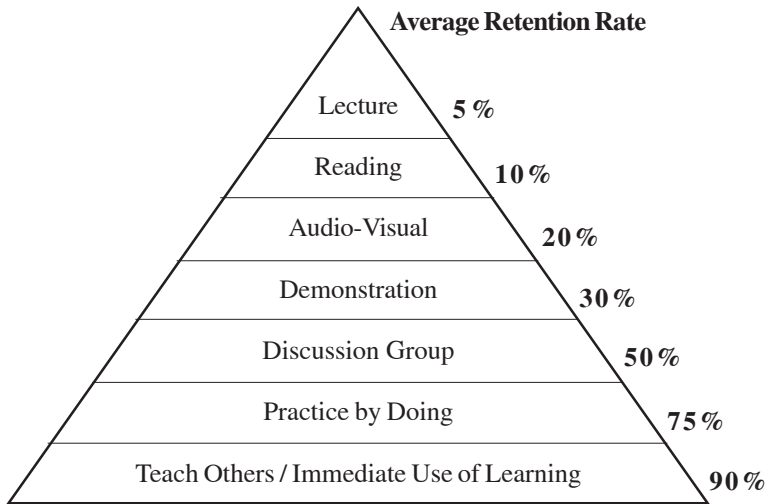


Figure 1: Learning Pyramid

(Source: National Training Laboratories, Institute for Applied Behavioral Sciences, 300N. Lee Street, Suite 300, Alexandria, VA 22314, 1-800-777-5227)

One-to-one Tutoring

In a typical ESL writing class, the teacher and a few extrovert students may dominate the talk, and the interaction can be limited. A good number of ESL learners are quiet and may appear passive. This could be because they probably do not have the meta-language to ask questions or to talk about their writing, or the classroom atmosphere is too threatening and inhibiting for them to venture with their assumingly stupid questions especially when the teacher is there to grade them. Some of them would probably talk if encouraged to, but the teacher may not have the time to assure everyone is given a chance to talk especially in a big class.

The scenario with one-to-one tutoring in a WC is different. Because the tutor attends to only one student at a time, the session can be focused on the individual learner's writing difficulty. The trained tutor can actually personalise the tutoring technique and style according to the student's personality and needs. For example, if the student needs to generate ideas or identify a focus, the tutor may use the non-directive approach. But if the student needs advice from a more experienced and more knowledgeable peer, then perhaps the direct approach would be more appropriate (Brooks, 2001; Carino, 2003; Cogie, 2001; Shamoon and Burns, 1995).

In North America, the clientele of many WCs is mainly first year composition and ESL students (see, for example, Bruce and Rafoth, 2004). This shows that WCs are especially useful for students who are less familiar with academic writing in English. In this light, the proposed WC approach will be even more useful in a purely ESL or EFL setting, where students can be given one-to-one attention for maximum personalised guidance.

Peer Tutoring

The purpose of peer tutoring in North American WCs is mainly to support students in their writing processes. Peer tutoring is different from classroom writing instruction; it is not intended to replace classroom instruction but to complement it (Harris, 1986). With the recognised position and contribution of WCs in North American universities, some WC practitioners are keen to promote the WC approach as a better pedagogy in writing instruction as compared to that conducted by a teacher in the classroom for its unique features such as individualisation and dialogic interaction (see, for example, Kinkead and Harris, 2000).

Especially helpful for ESL students who are new to the university culture is the non-threatening atmosphere of the WC. In the WC, the student is talking to a friendly tutor who is usually a non-evaluative peer and not an evaluative teacher who sets the assignment. There is less worry of losing face compared to that experienced in the class. Thus, students are more willing to take risks in asking questions

and in testing out hypotheses about writing in English in a WC than in a classroom (Wang, 1994). The peer tutor is also more understanding and more sympathetic than a teacher because the peer tutor has gone through the same struggle as the tutee in the writing process before (Capossela, 1998). The important role of peers in learning has also been confirmed by Grey (2005) who said that more is learned on the playing field and in discourse with peers than from the sage on the stage, and it is the second hand explanation from a colleague that situates the new concept, validates its importance and sanctions its legitimacy. (para.1). Most importantly, peer tutors have been trained to respond to ESL students' needs in their writing processes.

Student-Centred Pedagogy

The teaching profession is often confronted with the question of whether teachers should endeavor to meet students' needs, or students should meet teachers' requirements. The answer lies with the philosophy or the approach to teaching one believes in. A teacher who is sensitive to students' needs and teaches according to such needs is said to be practising student-centred pedagogy. On the other hand, if the teacher sets the instructional objectives according to what s/he feels students must achieve, the approach is teacher-centred pedagogy (Johnson, 2002).

Student-centred pedagogy is traceable to Carl Rogers' client-centred counseling that later evolved to become an approach in education when he observed students become passive, apathetic and bored in the traditional classroom (Rogers, 1983: 25). The main tenets of the student-centered approach include active learning, deep learning, learner taking responsibility, learner autonomy, interdependence between teachers and learners, mutual respect between teachers and learners, and reflexive learning (Lea *et al.*, 2003). It has also been argued that the abundance of knowledge has outgrown the capacity to learn. Therefore, it is imperative to teach students according to their needs, and "that the construction of the university must be based upon the student, and not upon the professor or upon knowledge" (Ortega y Gasset, 1992: 43). Today the use of student-centered pedagogy is reflective of the democratic society that respects individual freedom and choice (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005).

Research studies have found positive findings from student-centred learning (see, for example, Hall and Saunders, 1997). It was reported that students from a UK university liked the approach as it was more interesting, and more respect was accorded to the students that boosted their confidence (Hall and Saunders, 1997). On the other hand, the skeptic pointed out that if every student is unique and his or her choice respected, it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to come up

with a pedagogy that suits the whole class. Also, if each individual becomes the focus, the social aspect of collaborative learning might be overlooked (Simon, 1999). Therefore, there should be a balance between individualistic student-centred approach and collaborative learning. And, the gist of this balance has been summed up by Oblinger (2005) who states that competence is developed in active, exploratory, and social settings. When participants are asked to think conceptually and critically, involving both peers and experts, learning is enriched (in Vision section). The quote underlines two principles of student-centred pedagogy social learning and active learning that are being practised in WCs and OWLs.

Tutoring in the WC is student-centred as tutors are trained to focus on improving the student writer and not the writing, and the student is an active participant in deciding and initiating positive changes in his or her writing (North, 1984). This adage of North (1984) laid the foundation of WC theory and practice, and the WC approach is now synonymous with helping the novice writer in the writing process. A student-centred pedagogy is especially useful for ESL learners because it is intrinsically motivating as individual learning needs and styles are taken into account, and learners have a voice in deciding the kind of curriculum or activities they prefer (Johnson, 2002). It also informs the service providers such as teachers, tutors and administrators to accept learners as they (learners) are and not as what they (learners) should be in servicing English instruction to this group of learners.

Guided Learning and Writing

Personalised tutoring, the key practice of the WC approach, is similar to a trade master training an apprentice to acquire a skill, and this kind of personalised coaching has been traditionally recognised as being effective (Shamoon and Burns, 1995). A study has shown that novice writers learned not just writing skills but also cognitive and communicative strategies from WC tutoring (Palinscar, 1986). Student writers were also able to achieve much more with apprenticeship kind of guidance, similar to children with parental guidance who were able to learn more than through independent learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, novice ESL writers naturally require and benefit from guidance by peer tutors who are more advanced than them in learning to write academic discourse in English.

Dialogic Pedagogy

A number of authors have discussed the power of conversation in learning. Cross (2005), for example, proposes that conversation is important for tapping into collective wisdom and it allows for co-evolving the future (para. 13). Over twenty years ago, Bruffee (1984) too, in propagating peer tutoring and collaborative writ-

ing, highlighted the power of talk. Through talk, better understanding is fostered among teachers, tutors and students. Talking to someone who will listen and knows how to listen (North, 1984) also helps alleviate writing apprehension of ESL students as they learn to write in the new language and helps build confidence in them in their writing processes.

Talking also helps to generate and shape ideas. With reference to children who solve problems by verbally speaking aloud about their strategies (Vygotsky, 1978), WC tutors can help ESL students rehearse ideas for a written assignment by getting them to talk about their ideas through asking questions. When tutors ask the right questions, students feel comfortable that the tutors are interested in their work, and the tutors can also help students see and fill up gaps in their idea presentation (Purcell, 1998).

Further, Lunsford's (1991) WC-as-Burkean-Parlor model best illustrates the notion that dialogues facilitate the social construction of meaning and that meaning is negotiated and seldom remains static. It is also through engaging in dialogues with WC tutors that student writers learn the discourse of the academia. In a WC too, whether physical or virtual, students have the chance to interact with members of the same discipline, and thus learn the disciplinary discourse to become a member of the discipline. The power of dialogues especially with peers has also been strongly expressed by Grey (28 March, 2005) at his *Knowledge at Work* weblog. According to him, The key to learning is not the medium or the message; it is the quality of the dialogue with your peers that really matters.^f (para. 2).

Small Group Workshops

The WC approach also includes small group workshops on specific writing skills specially designed to meet ESL students' needs. This kind of workshop can be conducted in the WC where students of similar proficiency level from a similar discipline and having a common need or a similar difficulty with writing are grouped together. Usually a specific concern workshop is conducted when the WC director or tutors observe a common need among a group of users (Garner and Young, 2001). Instead of repeating the same instruction or procedure a few times, the workshop method is more cost and time effective. Sometimes writing skills workshops are conducted in a classroom if a teacher requests for it. These workshops are useful in helping teachers who are new and having little experience in teaching writing. The small group pedagogy also includes peer response groups in a writing classroom.

Collaborative Pedagogy

In a WC, the tutor asks the tutee questions to find out more about the writer and the

writing, and the tutee asks the tutor questions to find out how best to approach or improve a writing task. Together the tutor and the tutee embark on a joint enquiry known as collaborative learning about writing (Harris, 1992). In the collaboration, both parties learn and gain confidence in the tutoring and writing processes.

This kind of reviewing and responding to writing can be expanded to a writing class. Some WCs are helping novice composition teachers to implement peer review or response pairs or groups in the classroom by providing examples of response sheets to the teachers, and to help train ESL students in appropriately responding to their peers' writing (Breuch, 2004; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2004).

When a peer group is actively contributing in creating a piece of writing, the resultant work is said to have multiple authorship, and this is the essence of collaborative writing which is common for writing or research projects (Harris, 1992). Collaborative writing fosters not just enhanced individual writing competence but also an appreciation for comradeship and team work, and thus it is good preparation for citizenry and students' professional career upon their graduation.

For tertiary ESL students who are beginning to learn academic writing in English, collaborative pedagogy is especially useful. Because knowledge is justified belief (Rorty, 1979), discussing and working together give them a chance to test their ideas and English rhetoric with their collaborators, and thus they learn better and retain better. Collaboration gives students the chance to teach and learn from one another, and to discover ideas that they individually may not be able to. On top of the above, collaboration allows learning to become a continuous process. While generating new content out of the resulting interactions, collaboration also acts as a quality feedback loop (Howard, 2001).

Pedagogy of Belonging and Inclusiveness

In North America, the established WCs pride themselves as practising the pedagogy of belonging and inclusiveness in that all learners, regardless of ethnic origins, social-economic background, and language proficiency levels, are welcome at the WC (Bokser, 2005). Although the tertiary student demography in Malaysia may not be as diverse as that of North America because it basically comprises only three main races, there exists some power politics in the university with the *Bumiputra* or Malays making up about 65% of the total tertiary population. The tertiary demography will become more diverse with the recent announcement that public universities will uncap the 5% limit and will admit more international students from 2006 (*The Star*, 20 February, 2005). Hence the pedagogy of belonging and inclusiveness is applicable in promoting goodwill and understanding among the different ethnic groups.

Whole Language Pedagogy

Unlike native North American first year tertiary students who may be lacking in only academic writing skill, ESL undergraduates in Malaysia are generally weak in all English skills that include reading, speaking, writing, grammar and vocabulary. For tertiary education, writing, especially academic writing in English, is deemed more important than the other language skills because it is usually by means of writing that a student's academic progress is being evaluated.

However, reading skills in English are important too as most reference books in the UPM library collection and a lot of the Internet reference content are in English. If students cannot read efficiently in English, they may not gain the knowledge in such sources for them to write a satisfactory paper. A few WC practitioners have suggested incorporating literacy alongside writing tutoring (see, for example, Grigsby, 2001). They argue that a growing number of students cannot read and think critically, and this must be addressed first before they can write effectively. There is also the causal relationship between reading and writing skills, that both skills complement each other (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005).

In the university, Malaysian undergraduates are not required to speak in English unless they study an English language course that requires them to only speak in English. A good number of the students can speak a sub-standard local variety of English (fondly known as *Manglish*, a hybrid word for Malaysia or Mandarin + English), that is made up of a mixture of English and local languages spoken in a local accent such as Malay, Mandarin or Tamil. Standard spoken English (and correspondingly, listening skills in English), is useful when students join the workforce especially when they become a professional such as a lecturer, a doctor, an accountant or an entrepreneur, who may need to communicate internationally or with local professional clients who speak mainly in English.

Therefore, for a WC to be more useful for ESL students, it must do more than just helping with only English writing skills. After all, the whole language theory suggests that language literacy is best acquired through the integrated approach where all language skills are taught and learned at the same time, thereby reinforcing each other (Fitzgerald, 1994; Day, 2002).

In this light, a WC for ESL tertiary students would be more useful if it also incorporates self-access language learning and language advising. In other words, a WC for ESL students should also function as a language learning environment where students are immersed in the authentic use of English in all the language skills.

Online Pedagogy for Tutoring and Writing

Online pedagogy has been practised in WC and OWL tutoring and writing. In 2000, Krause posed four limitations and four benefits of using the WWW as a pedagogical tool for writing classes. These limitations and benefits are relevant to the practice of WCs and OWLs. The four limitations include that creating a web page or a website is time consuming, learning the Hyper Text Mark-up Language (HTML) for web design or creation can be difficult, advanced Web features require expensive hardware to operate, and not everyone has access to the Internet. Today, various authoring tools have simplified webpage production without necessarily learning HTML, computer equipment is getting cheaper, and more people can now afford Internet access as the fee has dropped. On the other hand, we continue to enjoy the four benefits that include faster and easier distribution of instructional materials across time and space, the Web extends the opportunity for students to conduct research, the online platform provides an authentic publishing opportunity, and it eases and promotes collaboration between teachers and students and among students (Krause, 2000). Benefits not mentioned by Krause include increased opportunity in learning outside the normally teacher-fronted classroom. For ESL students studying English in their native countries, the web has made possible increased opportunities to interact with native speakers in authentic situations.

On top of the aforesaid benefits, there is a more compelling reason for using online pedagogy. The online pedagogy is most useful to ESL students who have limited proficiency. In a traditional classroom that privileges teacher-centred hegemony, ESL students might be too inhibited to talk or ask questions. Protected by a pseudonym or online anonymity, the online platform gives the timid ones, who thought their English might be laughed at, a voice, rather than continuously being excluded, marginalised, or silenced in the traditional classroom^f (Wahlstrom, 1994:173). In short, online pedagogy encourages equal participation in language learning.

There is also a strong reason for using online pedagogy to teach online writing. A recent report by the WIDE (Writing in Digital Environments) Research Center (2005) cited that 44% Internet users have contributed their thoughts and their files to the online world^f in the form of websites, newsgroups, blogs, chats and other emerging digital applications. The growing extent of online writing should convince that writing instruction should also include teaching the techniques of online writing for an online audience and using various online software and strategies, and the best way to teach online writing software is to illustrate the actual use by teaching online.

Recently, there seems to be a shift in online pedagogy from teaching to

supporting learning. In the past decade, attention was focused more on effective presentation of online materials in engaging learners. Education providers have come to realise that transporting materials online and using sophisticated web designs do not necessarily ensure optimal use and effective learning, and thus more attention is now given to observing and supporting learning activities online (CEVU, 2001). The WC approach fits in well with this growing trend as its main focus is on supporting the full development of ESL learners from the academic, cognitive, affective and social perspectives.

Conclusion

Numerous studies have suggested that academic writing in English is a difficult skill to learn for both native English and ESL students (see, for example, Connor, 1996; Silva, 2001). For ESL students, learning to write academic English is often aggravated by the lack of writing instruction in their first language (Turner, 2006; Yasuda, 2006). Even for students who are good in writing, the act of writing remains difficult, as illustrated in the quote of Thomas Mann (1875 ~ 1955) that A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.^f The reason is that academic writing in English, especially for the ESL learners, is based on a culmination of multiple abilities that include linguistic, cognitive, rhetorical, and social skills and knowledge, on top of the right feeling and attitude toward the act of writing.

Therefore, in developing ESL students writing competence and nurturing a positive attitude toward writing in English, students require alternative instruction and support in addition to those afforded by a traditional teacher-fronted classroom. The writing centre approach, based on a blended model of a physical WC and a virtual OWL, should be able to meet these needs of ESL tertiary students in the application of the WC approach as writing pedagogy. The extent of the applicability pivots on the wisdom and flexibility of each institutional innovator in adapting the approach to meet local needs, and on-going research in each specific area of the WC approach discussed in this paper.

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