

# GIVING 'VOICE' A VOICE IN THE ACADEMIC WRITING CLASS

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of 'voice' is debated in the field of second language writing pedagogy. There is debate about both what 'voice' is and the extent to which it should receive attention in the writing classroom. This paper reports on the way in which 'voice' received attention on a university writing course at a New Zealand university as a result of a course evaluation exercise, and does so by drawing on a particular model of language curriculum design. When this model is applied, courses become dynamic and responsive to learner needs.

Keywords: academic writing, ESL writing, course design, voice, language curriculum design

## Introduction

What should a writing course teach? This is a question relating to the content and sequencing of a course that should be considered during any curriculum design exercise, and is closely tied to a corollary question: how should the content be taught? The answers to these two questions will largely determine what goes on in the classroom. Furthermore, the answers should be determined by more than teacher intuition; ideally, the answers will be informed by needs and environment analyses, and by the application of principles (for a comprehensive description of this approach to curriculum design, see Nation & Macalister, 2010; the model is shown in Figure 1).

In curriculum design the general category, principles, refers to research and theory about best practice in language teaching and learning. As an example, application of the principle that items that are more frequently encountered in a language should be taught before those that are less frequently found means that learning focuses on useful language. In other words, while it may be interesting to learn about *defenestration*, the word *window* is far more useful. However,

although principles such as the frequency principle are well-established and uncontroversial, there are other aspects of language learning where less certainty exists. Course designers need to respond to these as well.

An area of some debate in the teaching of writing is the attention that should be given to ‘voice’ (recently, e.g., Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Matsuda & Tardy, 2008; Stapleton & Helms-Park, 2008). This is a more complex question than ruling on the acceptability of first person pronoun use. Matsuda, for example, has defined voice as “the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-changing repertoires” (Matsuda, 2001, p. 40). Perhaps the key word here is ‘effect’ – that is, the effect on the reader achieved through the writer’s use of an extensive range of factors. Matsuda has also pointed out that voice forms “a significant component of identity” (Matsuda, 2001, p. 41). Some, such as Ivanic and Camps (2001, p. 31), strongly advocate attention to “issues of identity” in the writing classroom, and pedagogical attention is sometimes given to voice in commercial publications; Brick (2006, pp. 113 - 117), for example, shows how the choice of reporting verbs and their tenses allow writers to express their voice. Others, however, do not share this view. The principal criticism of voice in writing pedagogy is that “the large numbers of new L2 writers who are grappling with the fundamentals of syntax, lexis, and textual organization need not be further burdened by (prescriptive) notions of voice” (Stapleton & Helms-Park, 2008, p. 97). In other words, learners need to learn the language first.

The debate about voice was one issue that was able to be considered during the evaluation and re-design of an undergraduate writing course (Macalister, 2011). The course, which we shall call WRIT, exists to meet the writing needs of a body of students that shares only one common characteristic: all are non-native speakers of English. Apart from that, the student body is diverse and includes undergraduate and postgraduate students, international students who are required to meet language proficiency levels before entry to university and New Zealand residents who have direct entry without any assessment of their language proficiency, and students who have chosen the course voluntarily as well as those who have been required to take it. Such a diverse body has diverse needs. However, by enrolling in the course all are indirectly expressing a desire to be successful members of an academic writing community. This can be seen as the ‘voice’ that students wished to develop, the effect they wished to make on the reader.

One of the questions that arose during the evaluation of WRIT concerned the cognitive demands of the course. The course required students to produce two

essays on quasi-academic topics (such as renewable energy or sustainable tourism) based on a book of pre-selected readings. While care was taken to include readings that were (in the eyes of native-speaking instructors) well-written and accessible, many students had difficulty understanding the texts. This raised the uncomfortable question as to whether students who were being assessed on their writing ability were being penalised for a lack of understanding of the input provided. If that was indeed the case then the input texts and writing tasks also needed to be re-considered. This led to another of the debates concerning the teaching of writing – the role of literature (Hirvela, 2001; Horowitz, 1990; Spack, 1985; Vandrick, 2003).

There may be parallels between the debate about the role of literature in the teaching of writing, and the debate on voice. If learning to write can be equated with the acquisition of a series of skills and sub-skills, questions of voice and writer identity could be ignored. On the other hand, if learners are reading and responding to literature, there would be an expectation that their voice will be heard in their response. Voice, in this sense, may be understood as an explicit awareness of the student writer's views and its presence may be required by the writing task (as in Figure 2 below), but it is worth noting that this sense of voice as 'having something to say' "is in fact subsumed by the concept of voice as self-representation", the voice that is discursively constructed (Ivanic & Camps, 2001, pp. 7 - 8). Indeed, even if a writer is not obviously expressing an opinion the writing "always conveys a representation of the self of the writer" (Ivanic & Camps, 2001, p. 5) through the conscious and unconscious choices made about the discursive features used in the text. In WRIT successful self-representation would be as a member of the target academic writing community.

In terms of curriculum development, a useful way to think of developing learner voice is provided by Casanave's conceptualisation of learning to play writing games (Casanave, 2002). She isolates and proposes half a dozen 'entry level' game strategies that learners need to control:

- interacting with texts and with others about texts
- blending voices i.e. published authorities & their own
- owning your research experiences and telling a good story from them
- speaking with authority
- learning to love writing (or at least to become fluent)
- making the paper look right

With the possible exception of 'learning to love writing', these game strategies can be loosely mapped on to other representations of voice, such as ideational, interpersonal and textual positioning (Ivanic & Camps, 2001) or to the notions of autobiographical and discursive selves and the self as author (Clark & Ivanic, 1997).

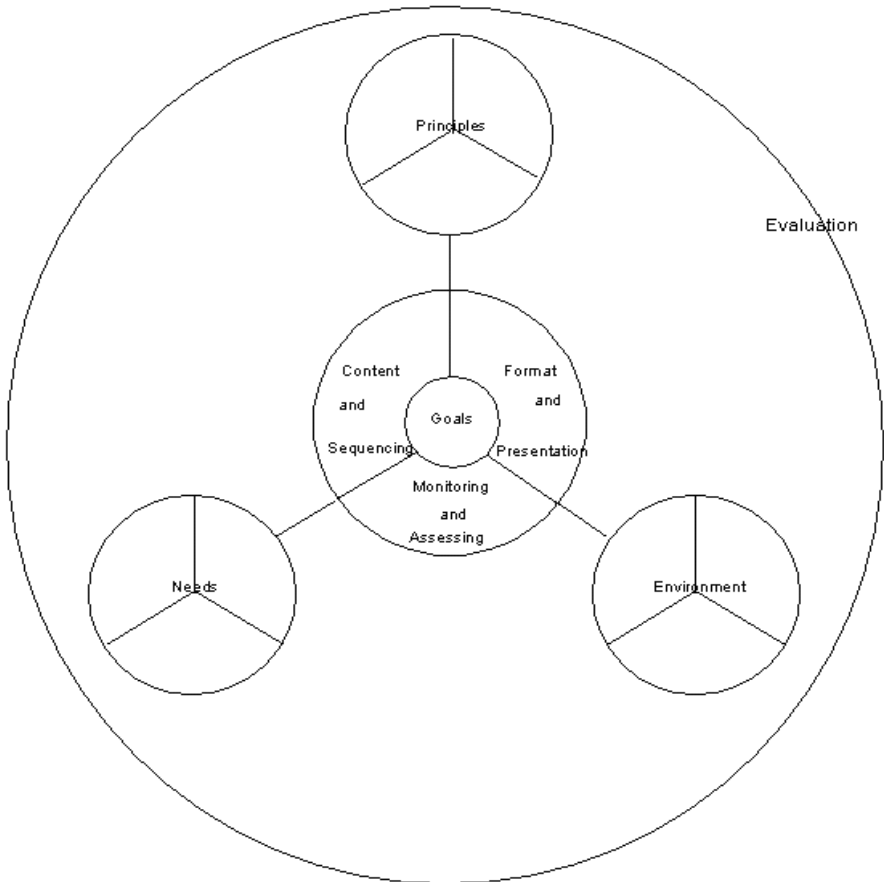


Figure 1: Language curriculum design model

### Implications for the classroom

In this section, the implications of the debate about voice for WRIT are considered. Following the Nation and Macalister (2010) model, these implications are considered in terms of the implementation of a principle affecting content and sequencing, format and presentation, and monitoring and assessment. The principle might be phrased as *Learners need the tools to be part*

*of their target discourse community* and this in turn can be seen as resulting from a broader principle requiring “a careful consideration of the learners and their needs” (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 65). In terms of the model, then, the focus is on one outer circle affecting the inner circle, which is what happens in the classroom. It is perhaps worth emphasising that there were other considerations arising from all three outer circles that also affected the re-design of the course (see Macalister, 2011).

#### *Course content decisions*

Content and sequencing decisions relate to what is to be taught, and the order in which it will be taught. In many general courses grammar is the core content, but this may not be explicit as the surface content is topic-based. Grammar is not, however, the only option; other options include vocabulary, ideas, and skills. Skills (such as summarising or paraphrasing) typically form an important part of the content of an academic writing course such as WRIT.

At the same time, however, removing the cognitive challenge posed by quasi-academic input materials was important for WRIT, as failure to understand input texts would prevent learners from writing meaningfully about those texts. Thus, the writing tasks needed to be based on texts that learners could reasonably be expected to read and understand. Furthermore, the texts needed to have the potential to evoke a personal response from a reader; such a response could initially be at the level of liking, or not liking, a text. That response would, however, need to be backed up with text-based reasons.

Literature seemed to be the likeliest source for such texts, and in the event much of the course content became short stories or extracts from longer works. The New Zealand writer Witi Ihimaera proved to be a particularly good source of content, for not only have his stories been enduringly popular but they are accessible to most readers and, which proved a particular bonus for WRIT as will be seen below, a number of his stories exist in two versions written thirty years apart.

As another example of a good source of content, extracts from works by Chinese women writing in both fiction and non-fiction about women’s lives in modern China also provided content to which students could respond at a personal level and then develop a text-based argument.

#### *Format and presentation decisions*

Format and presentation decisions relate to how the content is to be taught. It would not, of course, be sufficient to simply present the learners with the text and require a written task based on it. Before beginning reading the text, tasks to

arouse interest in it, to facilitate understanding, and to encourage a focus of meaning are desirable. A feature of the re-designed WRIT was the ‘write-before-you-read’ task (Spack, 1985) in which students write about their expectations of a text based on limited information, such as the title, before they read it. As an example, with the Ihimaera short story *The Beginning of the Tournament* (1972, 2003), the cycle of tasks might be:

- the teacher writes the story title on the board
- the whole class brainstorms around the title, with responses recorded on the board
- students write about their expectations of the story individually for ten minutes
- students read the story individually
- students write about their response to the story; was it what they expected
- the whole class shares their responses

The relevance to voice of this activity cycle is that it guides learners to an understanding of the text and a response based on their own meaning making (cf. the use of literary journals in Zainal, Termizi, Yahya, & Mohd Deni, 2010).

Following this introductory activity cycle, students were guided through the writing process over a period of three to four weeks, leading to submission of an assignment based on the reading, or readings. A similar introductory activity cycle would then be used for the next input texts.

Much of the guidance offered during the writing process would be familiar to that offered on any academic writing course. For example, citing conventions might be the focus of one workshop session leading to the expectation that suitable citations would be appropriately included in the next assignment draft.

### *Monitoring and assessment*

This was an undergraduate credit-bearing course and so assessment was integral. The principal assessment items were assignments based on response to input texts; an example for a Witi Ihimaera story is shown below. The key features are that while the task is characteristic of much university-level assessment (constructing an argument drawing evidence from multiple texts) the students were able to draw on an affective response to a short literary text.

Witi Ihimaera has written two versions of the story *Beginning of the Tournament*. Identify differences between the two stories and suggest reasons why the author made these changes. Evaluate the success of the changes in terms of **either** the reader's enjoyment **or** the author's reasons for making the changes.

Figure 2: Example of assignment topic

It is also worth noting that as learners were guided through the writing process, there were multiple feedback opportunities (cf. Kathpalia & Heah, 2010), and this in turn allowed for constant monitoring of student progress on and engagement with the writing task. For instance, following the familiarisation with citing conventions peer feedback on the next assignment draft would focus on that feature of the text.

## Discussion

The decision to use literature as input material and to give attention to voice, at least insofar as learners were encouraged and expected to base their argument on their individual response to and understanding of the texts read, appeared to be vindicated by the evaluation measures used on WRIT. These included a reflective essay in which students were encouraged to be honest. The lack of any negative comment about this aspect of the course allayed any concerns that the use of literary texts may have lacked face validity for these academically-focussed students (just as literature has been successfully used in medical education; see DMani, 2011).

One hope in the re-design of WRIT was that students would so enjoy the texts used in the course that they would be motivated to read more. This hope was based on research into extensive reading that has shown how the writing of students exposed to a sufficient quantity of text improves (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Tsang, 1996). However, successful reading – and enjoyment – of one short story by Witi Ihimaera did not lead WRIT students to read other stories by the same author. It may be that the demands of academic study do not leave second and foreign language students either opportunity or time to read outside the requirements of their courses (Claridge, 2011). Thus language proficiency development remained an issue for a number of students. As a result, one likely

future change in the course may be the inclusion of more deliberate consciousness-raising activities, as suggested by Ferris (2004, p. 59). Examples of such activities are error logs (Lee, 2005) and Dictogloss (Dung, 2002; Wajnryb, 1990). As students frequently mention grammar improvement when engaged in goal-setting exercises in the early stages of the course, such activities could be included without difficulty, and would be compatible with the course goal. More explicit training in vocabulary learning strategies (Nation, 2001) could also be helpful.

These reflections may recall the debate over voice in second language writing pedagogy that was discussed earlier. After all, repeated, frequent grammatical errors, limited vocabulary and a lack of clarity of expression are not going to assist non-native-English-speakers in representing themselves as competent members of the writing community to which they aspire. Stapleton and Helms-Park (2008), as previously noted, have argued for learning the language first and reflecting on the writing produced by at least some of the learners enrolled in this course would seem to suggest that language concerns deserve more explicit attention than they currently receive. Yet it does not follow that the discursal construction of voice – that is, “voice as self-representation” rather than as “having something to say” (Ivanic & Camps, 2001) – cannot also receive attention. Table 1 illustrates how issues of identity were addressed in WRIT in terms of Casanave’s (2002) writing games, and how voice received attention in the process.

The examples shown in Table 1 all fitted comfortably within the three to four weeks from the initial introduction of the text to the submission of the final draft for assessment. A similar format was then followed for the next piece of assessment, allowing repeated experience with these writing games.



**Table 1:** Examples of application of Casanave's writing games

<b>Casanave's writing games</b>	<b>Examples in course</b>
interacting with texts and with others about texts	An emphasis on learners' responses to what they read; mainly literary texts chosen to facilitate a personal response; opportunities to interact with others about responses
blending voices i.e. published authorities & their own	Requirement to quote from texts read to illustrate argument in own writing; also to seek support from other sources (e.g. published interview with author)
owning your research experiences and telling a good story from them	Tasks require learners to draw on their own reactions to/understandings of texts
speaking with authority	Raising awareness of linguistic choices writers make, e.g. gendered pronouns, referring verbs, hedging
learning to love writing (or at least to become fluent)	Writing fluency development activities structured around 'write before you read'
making the paper look right	Explicit attention given to skills associated with academic writing, e.g. referencing, as well as more general skills, e.g. paragraphing

## Conclusion

The broad goal of this paper was to illustrate how the language curriculum design model proposed by Nation and Macalister (2010) operates to re-design a course, and thus illustrates the dynamism of the curriculum design process. At a more specific level, however, the intention has been to consider one of the debates in second language writing pedagogy, the debate about the attention to voice, and how course design can respond to it. The writing games proposed by Casanave (2002) provided a pedagogically useful framework for thinking about giving attention to voice. When delivered to students, the response to the 'voice' debate reflected in the re-design of WRIT did work well in its particular context, but it is certainly not the aim of this paper to suggest this is the definitive response. Indeed, the very dynamism of the curriculum design model denies the possibility of a single 'right' answer. Furthermore, the experience of delivering the re-designed WRIT course raised the potential for on-going change,

particularly with re-thinking the way in which language development could be encouraged. This is, of course, one side of the debate about the attention that should be given to voice, and may suggest that in the real world of the classroom both sides merit attention.

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