Assessing Writing Assignments for Non-native English Speaking Students in Your Classes

Dr. Estela Ene
Frank Smith
English for Academic Purposes Program
Questions

• What is good student writing, and what is truly important when evaluating a student’s paper?

• Why do some students who have been studying English for a long time still make the same mistakes?

• What pedagogical techniques can be implemented in assessment without spending significantly more time than with native English speaking students?
BACKGROUND
Defining “non-native speakers of English”

- Visa students (“traditional” international students)
- Domestic students by paperwork
  - Children of immigrants (“Generation 1.5”)
    - Generation 1.5 students may “pass” as native speakers when using non-academic/informal language
    - Recent immigrants who are naturalized
- What they have in common:
  - Language issues originating in their native tongue
  - Limited or no prior exposure to academic writing

But remember! One’s first language is one’s foundation for one’s additional language(s).
Similarities between native and non-native English speakers

1. Academic language is no one’s first language.

2. Learning how to write well takes a long time and practice.

3. Learning how to write well requires explicit instruction for most.
IUPUI demographics & impact on classroom

EAP Graduate and Undergraduate Students’ Countries of Origin in Fall 2012

Saudi Arabia 41%
China 29%
Other 12%

Indonesia 2%
Thailand 2%
Nigeria 3%
South Korea 3%
India 4%
Qatar 1%
Iran 1%
Iraq 1%
Russia 1%

EAP Graduate and Undergraduate Students’ Countries of Origin in Fall 2012
Discussion:

What factors might influence how well a second language writer can write?
Sources of difference

- First culture (C1)
- First language (L1)
  - Transfer
  - Positive
  - Negative
  - Literacy
- Cognitive factors
  - Stage of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)
  - Difficulty of task
- Individual factors
  - Personality
  - Motivation
- Other
Cultural influences on discourse patterns

- Kaplan, Robert. *Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education* (1966)

- “Different” ≠ “Bad”

* see handout 1
Why culture matters

• Rhetorical differences due to culture
  • Recognizing that “to be truly ‘fluent,’ our [non-native speakers] would have to be able to produce essays in English that were not only grammatically and syntactically, but also rhetorically indistinguishable from those written by their NS peers. But...even writers who are isolated for years from their first language (L1) culture produce texts in their L2 which carry noticeable L1 features ... and we can neither legislate nor educate away culturally determined rhetorical differences in writing (Land & Whitley, 324).
Why the L1 and SLA matter

• Positive and negative transfer

• Literacy in multiple languages does not develop uniformly

• BICS vs. CALP
  • BICS = basic inter-personal communication skills
  • CALP = cognitive academic language processes

• Distinction evident in visa students and Gen. 1.5 students
Assessing writing
“Good writing” = “Good thinking”? 

- The many variables involved in second language acquisition prevent good conceptual thinking from transferring smoothly into good writing.

  - Background knowledge
  - Comprehension
  - Critical thinking
  - Logical organization of thoughts

  ![Diagram showing the relationship between background knowledge and language in good writing]

  - Language
Timed AND untimed writing

Timed Writing
• Limited vocabulary
• Less editing
• Less polished structure
• More L1 interference

Take-home Writing
• Opportunity for revision
  • Individual
  • From peers
  • From writing center
  • From office hours

* Will likely still reflect that L2 is developing.
Instructions and rubrics

• Assessment begins with the assignment design

• Articulate expectations
  • To yourself
  • In assignment sheets/instructions
  • Through model assignments
  • In grading criteria shared with the students

  - Structure of the written piece (what sections and subsections)
  - Degree of objectivity (how much fact, how much opinion, is “I” allowed, active vs. passive voice)
  - Length
  - Format
  - Citation style
  - Other?

* see handout 2
Activity Two

• Read the sample paper

• Answer the questions on the worksheet

• Disciplines:
  • Biology
  • Electrical engineering
  • Communication studies
  • Education
  • Computer science
  • Optics

Activity Two
The place of accuracy in “good writing”

• Yes, accuracy is important
  • but not the most important

• Higher vs. lower order concerns
• Untreatable errors (Ferris, 1999)
• Grammar as incidental learning (Matsuda, 2012)

• Error gravity
  • perception vs. SLA reality
Pedagogical recommendations

• Read through once without marking

• Note positive aspects first

• Provide general end comments, beginning with positive feedback and following up with specific areas of improvement.

• Prioritize.

• Remind student of resources available.
Yussuf,

Your report is **structured** according to my instructions and practices in the field we’ve discussed in class. I **like the way you adapted the subheadings** of the different sections to describe your subject matter. However, some of the **paragraphs** which were supposed to focus on only one aspect of the process actually tackle more than a topic at a time. You need to separate the paragraphs in order to focus them. It would be helpful to **use more varied transitions** instead of “now,” which may be fine in oral presentations but not in written reports. Please also pay attention to the **subject-verb agreement** issues I’ve underlined.
Pedagogical recommendations

• Require/encourage drafts

• Ask for outlines/key ideas to be submitted with final draft

• Use self-assessment (focused vs. general)

• Use peer-assessment /review (focused vs. general)

• Conduct in-class conferences

• Alternate between analytic and holistic rubrics

• Create a personal database of assignments – defined and modeled
Final thoughts

• What is good writing?
  • Writing that addresses the task and present appropriate content adequately organized and in comprehensible language (but depending on subject matter and audience, accuracy may plan a larger role).

• Why do some students continue to make certain mistakes?
  • Their language is “under construction”
  • Some errors are untreatable

• How can we assess without spending significantly more time?
  • See previous two slides
Thoughts?

Comments?

Q & A
Selected References

• International Students: Strengthening a Critical Resource - Maureen S. Andrade
• Ferris, *Teaching College Writing to Diverse student Populations*
• Flaitz, *Understanding your Interntational Students: An Educational, Cultural and Linguistic Guide*
• Hafernik and Wiant's *Integrating Multilingual Students into College Classrooms: Practical Advice for Faculty*
• Ilona Leki's Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers