Designing Writing Assignments for Non-native English Speaking Students

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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 A LOT OF PRACTICE.

3. LEARNING HOW TO WRITE WELL REQUIRES EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION FOR MOST.
Activity 1: Inquiry into your classroom

- Jot down where your non-native English speaking (NNS) students are typically from.

- In what ways do your non-native English speaking students struggle with writing assignments, and how do you think their struggles differ from those of native English speakers?

- Share with the group (5 min).
IUPUI demographics & impact on classroom

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

- Saudi Arabia 41%
- China 29%
- Other 12%
- India 4%
- South Korea 3%
- Thailand 2%
- Nigeria 3%
- Indonesia 2%
- Qatar 1%
- Iraq 1%
- Iran 1%
- Russia 1%
- Venezuela 1%
- Egypt 1%
- Nigeria 3%
- Other 12%
Why culture matters

- High Power Distance cultures (Hofstede)
  - Students tend to be respectful of the instructor
  - Students more reluctant to ask for clarification

- Oral tradition vs. written tradition
  - Students may not be proficient writers in either their native or additional language(s)
  - Students may value written communication less
  - Students may prefer to have instructions repeated orally (regardless of aural proficiency)

*Composition courses are a staple of the US education system.*
Culturally-influenced discourse patterns


- “Different” ≠ “Bad”
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).
What is “good” student writing? What is truly important in student papers?

- IUPUI Principles of Undergraduate Learning
  - Core communication and quantitative skills
  - Critical thinking
  - Integration and application of knowledge
  - Intellectual depth, breadth, and adaptiveness
  - Understanding culture and society
  - Values and ethics
Why prompts matter

Remember: *The assignment should be challenging, but the assignment sheet shouldn’t.*

- Anticipating how the non-native speakers are going to interact with the assignment and designing assignments sheets with this population will result in
  - better product from the students
  - better learning outcomes
  - less time spent by the instructor clarifying what the assignment is really about
  - less anxiety & frustration for both the instructor and the student
  - greater opportunity to engage students intellectually
Why prompts matter

“Academic Writing is a form of testing”
(Reid & Kroll, p.261)

However, professors know what they want out of an assignment, but students likely do not.

“Faculty have a right to expect competent writing. But they cannot expect competent writing ... [that is] an accurate reflection of content knowledge or of higher-order thinking when the written assignments lack essential information or provide too much, are unclear or contradictory, are vague or picayune.”
(Alice Brand, 1992, p.157)
Aspects of prompts that can be difficult for non-native speakers

- Idiomatic language
- Cultural references/context
- Vague language choice
- Instructor unpreparedness to explain something orally in multiple ways
  - be consistent with terminology in assignment sheets, but be ready to change it up in spoken contexts
What’s not working here?

For your second paper, read 3 of the 7 articles related to patient medication compliance and successful interventions and then conduct a comparative analysis of the methodologies in terms of their efficacy. Dig into the heart of the matter and shine a spotlight on what best makes patients not turn a blind eye to their own needs and health, and how we can ensure patients do the right thing.

-- Idiomatic language
-- Cultural references/context
-- Vague language
-- Instructor unpreparedness to explain something orally in multiple ways
Ultimately, effective prompt design is a best practices issue

- What will be clear for your non-native English speaking students will also work for your native English speaking students.

- Consider this thought:

  “...because [university student bodies] are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, it is imperative that teacher-designers focus on precision in the language of writing assignments. For [Non-native English Speaking] students, the problem is more severe; they need more clarity of language, more background information, and more specified teacher expectations.”  

  (Reid & Kroll)
All students benefit from:

- Written instructions for all writing tasks
- An oral review of the written instructions (phrased differently in multiple iterations)
- A clear definition of the assignment and its purpose
- Step-by-step guidelines about how the assignment is to be structured and formatted
- A model assignment
Practical considerations: consistency in terminology

Why?

- One difference in linguistic facility between native and non-native English speakers is the breadth of synonymous language.

- Choose one term for each assignment type/task, and use that term consistently
  - Ex: Choose either “paper” or “summary” or “essay” or “document” within a single assignment, but don’t alternate between them within a single assignment.

  - Ex: Choose either “Exploring inconsistencies between” or “contrast” or “compare” within a single assignment, but don’t alternate between them within a single assignment.
Practical considerations: *White space, bullet points, underlining, etc. are our friends*

- Breaking text into manageable chunks makes it easier for students to absorb the information.
  - Students are less likely to miss key information, steps in a process, etc.
  - Returning to the assignment sheet to review key aspects of the assignment sheet is less burdensome
These short papers are designed to give you an opportunity to demonstrate higher level cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Please choose only one of the following two assignments. You may work by yourself or in a group of two. See the syllabus for assignment due dates.

Assignment #1: Models of Individual Behavior
We have discussed the assumptions about individual behavior that underlie the competitive economic model as well as several deviations from these assumptions that are often referred to as “behavioral economics.” You can review these in the lecture slides as well as I&C chapters 3 and 7. Given these models, please either create a short story, screen play, short film (synthesis) or analyze a piece of fiction (movie, TV episode, book) (analysis) that illustrates a model of behavior and how the individual with the chosen behavior makes a particular health-related decision.

(NOT READER FRIENDLY)
Conceptual considerations

Assignments should be
- “contextualized” & “authentic”
- based on accessible content
- developed with clearly established evaluation criteria

Reid & Kroll (2006): Best Practices in Writing Assignment Design
Recognizing what works: Successful prompts

Example 1: Freshman composition class, ½-way through the semester.

Example 2: 200-level Biology class, mid-term exam

Example 3: 300-level Intro to Linguistics course, near the end of the semester

How do the prompts succeed on the following levels?

- Context/authenticity
- Accessible/consistent language & content
- Clear evaluation criteria
Applying what works

Example 1: 100-level music class, 2\textsuperscript{nd} week of class

Example 2: 300-level business class, 2/3\textsuperscript{rd} of the way through the semester

Example 3: 200-level education course, 1\textsuperscript{st} week of class

How do the prompts falter on the following levels?

- Context/authenticity
- Accessible/consistent language & content
- Engaging
- Clear evaluation criteria
Take home messages

- Academic language is no one’s first language.

- Designing and evaluating tasks for non-native English speaking students is an issue of best pedagogical practices.

- A well designed assignment paves the way to better student writing and less time spent doing “damage control” later.
Resources

- English for Academic Purposes Program
- University Writing Center
- Bepko Learning Center
- Indiana Center for Intercultural Communication
- Office of International Affairs
References


