“Reading to Write” in East Asian Studies

BY LEORA FREEDMAN
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

INTERNATIONAL WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM CONFERENCE, JUNE 7, 2012

Our academic setting:

- Language and educational "gaps" among students in a large public university (23, 295 undergraduates in Faculty of Arts & Science, from over 140 different countries)

- Multilingual and diverse environment due not only to a large number of international students, but also to high levels of recent immigration (40% of Toronto residents born outside Canada)

- Variations in literacy due to social, economic, and educational inequities
- Large number of students (40-50%) who are “First in the Family” to attend university
- Policy of “Guaranteed Access” for all admitted students

Goals of tutorial system:

- Teach material not covered by professor in lecture
- Review and/or enrich lecture and reading material
- Facilitate student discussion of material
- Goals sometimes not explicitly stated by professor

Problematic aspects of tutorials:

- Large size
- Low attendance; late arrival
- Students arrive unprepared
- Students reluctant to speak even if prepared
- Language barriers
- TA's specialty not in area of course; difficult to answer all questions
- Sessions are a recap of lecture and readings and may become a substitute for them (identified as particular problem by East Asian Studies)

Specific linguistic issues to address:

- Gaps in academic vocabulary and phrasing (especially NNS but also NS)
- Students know vocabulary but miss overarching ideas, hierarchy of information (both NNS and NS)
- Previous methods of English language learning were “rote” (NNS and some NS)

- Reading speed is slow due to infrequent reading (both NNS and NS)
- Students unfamiliar with typical patterns of analysis and argument in English (especially NNS but also NS, in relation to particular disciplines)

“Linking literacies”:

- Critical reading, academic writing, oral ability and listening comprehension are strongly and complexly linked (Grabe; Williams; Yang).

- Academic reading and writing are “reciprocal” and writing is best developed by giving attention to both areas (Hirvela; Leki)

- Discussion of difficult, complex topics orally as well as in writing helps students make linguistic progress (Casanave & Sosa)

- Literacy proceeds most rapidly when language learning is embedded in “real” tasks which are meaningful to the student (Zamel)

Embedded language and writing instruction

- Addresses language learning in ways that are useful to both NS and NNS at varying levels
- Integrates linguistic learning with real and meaningful academic tasks
- Allows flexibility for instructors and TAs to determine the needs of a particular group
- May be part of classroom activities or done entirely as homework; may be optional or required

Goals include:

- Facilitating student engagement with the course material, especially readings
- Guiding students toward independent application of course concepts

- Helping students learn methods for critical engagement with texts
- Improving students' language abilities

“Reading to Write” initiatives

- Piloted by East Asian Studies in 2011-12; continuing in 2012-13
- To be piloted by Linguistics in 2012-13
- Computer Science developing initiative for 2013-14

- Methods used by TAs in the Writing Instruction by TAs (WIT) program since 2008 (Ecology & Evolutionary Biology; Religion; Philosophy, Linguistics, etc.)

Full departmental commitment included:

- 6 short (1 page) reading responses, 1 point each (summaries or active reading, or both); TAs responded on Blackboard
- instruction on reading strategies was integrated with discussion of course material in tutorials
- aspects of the writing process were practiced in tutorials as stages toward a research essay

- TAs attended 6 workshops on methods of integrating instruction in academic reading and essay writing
- Materials developed by ELL coordinator in consultation with a departmental “Lead TA” who helped train course TAs

Tutorial topics/ integrated with EAS material:

- Previewing
- Skimming and scanning
- Active reading
- Learning vocabulary from context clues
- Summarizing
- Question-based active reading discussion
- Distinguishing information vs. argument
- Visual mapping of an article

Tutorial topics:

- Effective in-class writing
- Exam skills
- Using sources and citation
- In-class work on thesis statements
- Freewriting
- “Talking through” ideas for essay with peers
- Peer exchange of essay drafts
- Revision of essay in response to TA comments

Early results from the EAS initiative:

- Drop in plagiarism, from 8% to less than 1%
- Disappearance of “patch writing”
- High attendance at tutorials
- More active participation by students, improved atmosphere in tutorials
- More evidence in research essays that students were familiar with the readings
- Rise in overall morale; Lead TA won faculty-wide Teaching Excellence Award

- Some TAs reported challenges in making enough time for discussion of course concepts
- Need to adjust the balance between delivering course content and activities promoting language development
- Some activities done in tutorials may be done outside of class in the coming year

Student surveys

Aspects of reading instruction were helpful for course work:

EAS103: 89% EAS105: 97%

Aspects of writing instruction were helpful for course work:

EAS103: 87% EAS105: 88%

Instruction in both reading and writing was helpful:

EAS103: 77% EAS105: 86%

Student surveys

Instructional topics (from a list of 15) most frequently cited as helpful for course work:

- Summarizing (60% in EAS103; 52% in EAS105)
- Skimming and Scanning (57% in EAS103; 40% in EAS105)
- Distinguishing Information vs. Argument (51% EAS105)
- Writing short reading responses (54% in EAS105)
- Question-based Oral Discussions of Readings: 41% EAS103; 75% in EAS105

Sample methods: Previewing/ Skimming

- Used prior to reading to create schemata for comprehension
- Demonstrate on the first day, or take 10-15 minutes at the end of any session
- Can lead into giving the class background information and terminology to make future reading more comprehensible
- Show students how to do it, and then encourage them to make it habitual

Active reading

- Promotes development of ability to reason while reading
- Provides “low-stakes” critical writing practice
- Students can bring to tutorial or turn in online
- If no time to mark, check off to see students’ concerns and interests, misperceptions
- Model active reading aloud, stopping to speak about your own reasoning process as you move through a difficult portion of a text.

Summarizing

- Promotes key cognitive and linguistic abilities
- Provides practice in articulating course concepts; “low-stakes” writing
- If summarizing is required, students are more likely to read ahead of a class meeting and to be prepared for a discussion.

- Can be done at home or on Blackboard; if no time to mark, check off and use to see what students understand

- In class, have students write summaries of an article in groups of 3, then exchange and evaluate for accuracy and clarity. Read the best ones aloud or post on Blackboard.

- Encourage students to make summarizing habitual

Visual mapping

- Addresses all students who learn visually; makes difficult concepts clearer to language-learners
- Maps can be made at home prior to a discussion or may be done in class, in groups of 2-3 students
- TA can model a map on the board or on a handout and then use it as the basis for a discussion

- Use comparison of students' maps as a jumping-off point for a discussion of the hierarchy of ideas in a text (relationships among overarching concepts and the points, sub-points, details, and examples that support these larger concepts)

Discourse analysis

- Promotes oral interaction among students
- Shows students features of a discipline-based text

- Teaches students to focus independently on reading as a model for their writing
- May be done at home or in class, in groups of 2-4; works best with non-textbook material

- Class activity may focus on a reading not yet completed by students
- If time is limited, TA can interject brief remarks on textual features as part of a larger discussion of content
- Time permitting, discourse analysis may be the basis for a full class activity, gone over in class afterwards

Student comment

I just wanted to say that I really appreciate the way that you've structured the course. The writing and studying techniques integrated as regular assignments is super helpful -- no other course I've taken has ever done this so concisely (and I'm in my fourth year with a minor in English...)

TA comment

I have definitely noticed that the quality of the written responses has greatly improved, particularly for our non-native English speakers, of whom there are many.

The programme is definitely of use for our students, and I certainly hope that we are able to continue it in the future (beyond next year).

Department chair's report

Everyone involved is in agreement that the program is critically needed and should definitely continue--we just need to have more discussions on how to adapt it given what we have learned from this first year of the pilot project.

English Language Learning site

Materials used are posted on the English Language Learning site, under Student Resources:

http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell