



Teaching ESL Students Tools for Understanding Writing Prompts

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In order to successfully understand writing prompts, ESL students need a strategy that can be adapted to a variety of disciplines. ESL teachers design prompts that allow students to succeed in the ESL classroom, but students have no strategy to use when confronted with a discipline-specific prompt. ESL teachers must teach their students skills that can be transferred to other disciplines, such as how to understand a writing prompt in a content course. The strategy proposed in this article is one that ESL teachers can teach their students and one that students can use beyond the ESL classroom.

Introduction

When students move from English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to their discipline courses, they are ill-prepared to understand new writing prompts. Writing prompts are defined by Canseco and Byrd (1989) as “detailed explanations by the instructor of the content and organization expected in the written product.” ESL teachers are trained to write prompts that will allow their students to succeed. They are encouraged to “design prompts with great care and to work through them in detail” (Pfinstag and O’Hara 1998) and to consider “the wording, the mode of discourse, the rhetorical specifications, and the subject matter” (Reid 1993). Outside of the ESL classroom, writing prompts become less clear and precise. Students encounter unfamiliar assignments and are unsure of how to approach them. When ESL students misunderstand writing prompts, their writing abilities are negatively affected. As ESL writing teachers and tutors, we can teach our students the following strategy, which will give them the tools they need in order to understand writing prompts in disciplines outside of the ESL classroom.

Necessity of a Strategy

Since ESL students typically first encounter academic English in an ESL composition class, it is important that ESL composition teachers prepare their students for courses beyond the ESL classroom. Spack (1988) discusses the purpose of an ESL composition teacher: “The role of the university writing teacher is to initiate students into the academic discourse community.” In a general composition class, students learn academic terminology, essay organization, and citation styles. But how far does this initiation really go?

The ESL classroom tends to be an English composition class at heart, focusing on rhetoric and inquiry. Spack (1988) states that an ESL class should be a humanities course, “a place where students are provided the enrichment of reading and writing that

provoke thought and foster intellectual and ethical development.” These skills are necessary for success in an American university. Most ESL students, however, do not go into the humanities. As Leki and Carson (1997) write, “ESL classes may require little of the type of writing that students will be expected to do in their content courses.” Therefore, an ESL writing teacher must initiate students into academic English, while also preparing them for the writing of the disciplines they will ultimately enter.

Most ESL composition teachers, however, are not experienced in disciplines such as engineering or physics. Spack (1988) argues, “English teachers cannot and should not be held responsible for teaching writing in the disciplines.” They do not have the knowledge or time necessary to devote to learning new disciplines. Leki and Carson (1997) agree, stating that “if [disciplinary] forms are needed, the disciplines appear to be teaching them.” The goal is not to teach discipline-specific writing, but to teach tools and strategies that can transfer to any discipline. Horowitz (1986) believes ESL instructors must prepare lessons that “ensure the maximum transferability of the skills they teach” for future classes. To do this, teachers must be aware of what their students face in different disciplines.

Even without teaching discipline-specific writing, teachers can prepare students for courses outside of the ESL classroom. While general ESL writing teachers do not have the expertise to teach students how to write for one specific discipline, they can still teach “general inquiry strategies, rhetorical principles, and tasks that can transfer to other course work” (Spack 1988). Pfinstag and O’Hara (1998) call this “basic classroom literacy” and note that it is necessary for success in discipline courses. Teaching students “basic classroom literacy” will enable them to transfer their skills from the humanities to courses such as psychology and chemistry.

Despite this agreement that ESL students must learn transferable skills, little research has been conducted and few strategies have been proposed on how ESL students can understand writing prompts in content courses. ESL teachers continue

to construct prompts that will enable their students to succeed, while those same students continue to struggle with prompts in other disciplines. This article bridges the gap between the ESL teacher's prompt and the vague, unfamiliar discipline's prompt. The following strategy is one that can be applied to various courses across the curriculum.

A Strategy for ESL Students

When a writing assignment seems daunting, students can break the prompt down into manageable steps. Johns (1986) taught a lesson to her students on “deconstructing” writing prompts, where students broke down a prompt until they understood “the directions of the writer of the prompt regarding aims, strategies, and content.” This deconstruction reveals the instructions that ESL students frequently miss. The process this article presents is a strategy checklist, which “make[s] a fine-tuned link between strategies and their use on language tasks” (Cohen 1998). This checklist shows students the connection between the instructions and how to carry those instructions out. The following strategy, based on Brizee’s (2011) article from the Purdue OWL and adapted by the author, gives ESL students a transferable strategy for approaching and deconstructing writing assignments in all disciplines.

1. Read the Entire Prompt Completely

Reading the entire prompt at the very beginning gives students an overall view of the assignment. Pfnstang and O’Hara (1998) found that ESL students have a tendency to focus on the first sentence of the prompt, and consequently write essays that do not meet the guidelines. Native English speakers, however, tend to scan the prompt until they find “a directive or a request.” Teaching students to scan will help them understand the assignment completely and not miss important steps.

As students go through each step, they should make a list of the instructions they do not understand, such as new

terminology, and any specifics that might not be included in the prompt, such as the length or due date.

Students can employ reading strategies to understand what an assignment is asking. When reading and responding to a writing prompt, students must “critically react to the content . . . recall main points and details . . . and synthesize information” (Shih 1992). All these reading strategies can be taught and can transfer to other disciplines.

2. Highlight Important Details and Words

Important details are the pragmatics of an assignment. Reid (1993) notes that ESL students will often misunderstand the length of a paper, when it is due, and even what the assigned topic is. Finding these important details at the beginning will help students determine the size of the assignment. Pen in hand, students should scan the prompt and circle information relating to length, format, due date, audience, and source requirements (Brizee 2011). When a prompt is short or does not provide much information about the pragmatics of an assignment, students can also check the course syllabus for more information. Canseco and Byrd (1989) noted that “the details given in the grading section of a syllabus [usually provide] important information about the assigned writing task.” The same applies for a rubric if the teacher provides one. If students are not writing a timed essay, they can take the time to list each requirement. Ryan and Zimmerelli (2010) state that identifying the audience and goal at the beginning of an assignment will lead to a stronger paper.

Key phrases in the prompts tell students what ideas their paper should discuss and how those ideas should be discussed. Brizee (2011) encourages students to underline phrases that their professor uses frequently. Key phrases are frequently bulleted or in questions included in the prompt. Students should ask themselves, “What is the purpose of the assignment?” The phrases underlined will tell a student what their topic should be and how to discuss it.

Students should also circle important terminology. An ESL student's confusion frequently stems from "a lack of adequate understanding of the terminology" (Cohen 1998). ESL teachers can introduce students to the academic terminology commonly used in writing prompts. They should make students aware of what is expected when a prompt uses phrases such as "explain the purpose of _____" or "identify and describe _____" (Reid 1993). Many prompts use terminology related to Aristotle's common topics: define, compare, relate, circumstance, and testify (Spack 1984). Teachers can prepare a handout explaining the definition of common terminology and use it as part of the class curriculum. By learning common terminology, students will be able to better decipher prompts.

Students should be aware of the different type of papers they will be expected to write. Each discipline will include its own type of papers, but Rose (1983) describes eight different discourse strategies commonly used: definition, seriation, classification, summary, compare/contrast, analysis, and academic argument. These are not just "modes" of discourse, but "strategies by which one explores information and structures by which one organizes it" (Rose 1983). When students encounter these words in a prompt and know what they entail, they better understand the assignment and have a specific strategy to use while writing.

Understanding vocabulary extends beyond awareness of discourse strategies and into familiarity with the jargon of each discipline. Canseco and Byrd (1989) found sixteen different technical phrases used for exams in business courses, which phrases were potentially confusing to ESL students. As ESL composition teachers cannot teach the specialized vocabulary of each discipline, students must apply what they already know about vocabulary acquisition. Leki and Carson (1997) note that the use of "phrasal formulas" can be helpful. Teachers can only give students a basic knowledge of typical prompt terminology and the tools to learn new terminology.

3. Rank Ideas in Order of Importance

A prompt can easily contain several topics or questions for students to consider, but not all of them can be covered in a single paper. Brizee (2011) writes that students should rank ideas by their importance. As students do this, ideas might begin to take on an outline form. It is important that students practice outlining, as it is a “basic skill expected of . . . students” (Canseco and Byrd 1989). As students list and rank ideas, possible topics will begin to occur to them. One might stand out as the most interesting, and a student will realize that he or she has found a topic to write about.

4. Think about How to Address the Prompt

Once students understand what their topic is, they can begin pre-writing. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* suggests three different pre-writing strategies students can use: brainstorming, where students list all the ideas related to a topic; free writing, where students write anything about the topic for five minutes; and clustering, where students make a diagram with the topic in the center and drawing branches to related ideas (2010). In addition to these three strategies, Spack (1984) presents five more strategies, which she calls “invention techniques,” that she teaches in her ESL classes: oral group brainstorming; list-making; looping, where students “write nonstop, with no self-censorship, on anything that comes to mind on a specific topic; then stop, read, reflect, and sum up in a single sentence what has just been written,” which is a procedure students repeat twice; dialogue writing, where students talk to themselves in writing about the topic; cubing, where students look at a subject from six different views by describing, comparing, associating, analyzing, applying, and arguing for or against; classical invention, where students write answers to several questions about the subject. The importance of these techniques is that students get all their ideas down on paper. Students start to think and write simultaneously (Spack 1984). Instead of immediately beginning to write with a vague

idea of their topic, pre-writing helps students choose a topic and narrow it down.

When pre-writing, ESL students may have an idea that they do not know the English translation of. Instead of wasting time trying to think up the right term, Spack (1984) encourages students to try pre-writing in their native tongue or to come up with their own words so that they do not stop writing. The goal is to keep inventing, so that students have a variety of ideas to choose from and can see how their ideas connect.

Spack (1984) believes ESL instructors must actively guide students through pre-writing strategies or else students will not use any. Students should be encouraged to try each strategy and discover what works for them. The understanding of each technique will help students develop their own tailored strategies.

5. Determine What Research Must Be Done

Students should ask themselves what they need to know before they can even begin drafting a paper. Is there specific terminology in the assignment that they do not understand? Are there areas of the topic that the student needs to understand better? What current debates are there on the subject, and what sort of stance can the students take? Is there a hole in the research that the student can fill? Leki (1995) labels this sort of background research as a “focusing strategy.” Students can read books and articles in the discipline until they discover a focus for their papers.

6. Look at Models

Students that are confused about the structure of a paper can ask their professors for models. A composition teacher cannot provide models for each discipline, but a course teacher should be able to furnish an example paper. Leki (1995) cautions students to be careful when looking for models; they should verify with the teacher that the model is appropriate for the assignment. ESL writing teachers should warn students against structuring

papers exactly like a model and teach them to use the model as a reference.

7. Ask Questions

If students have completed all of these steps but are still confused, it is time to ask some questions. They should refer back to their list of things they did not understand and create questions to ask the teacher. Leki (1995) identified asking questions as a “clarifying” strategy. Students can ask both the professor and other students for clarification on the points they do not understand. If students need help with research, they should approach a subject librarian or library reference desk. Students can also ask professors for specific feedback before the assignment is due, such as on a project proposal. Feedback gives students the confirmation that they are approaching an assignment correctly.

Composition teachers can help students learn how to ask questions and communicate their needs to other teachers. Tomas (2012) suggests a workshop where students read a sample prompt and identify any questions they have. Instructors give students an email template and then aid students in composing an email to a professor asking for clarification. A workshop on how to ask questions will teach students that questions are good and will show them the best way to communicate with their professors.

Conclusion

By “deconstructing” a writing prompt into manageable steps, students gain a better understanding of the assignment and are able to write a stronger paper. When students understand an assignment, they can then complete it with a “sense of authority and commitment” (Nelson 1995). Teachers can use these strategies in other teaching areas, which will give students that same “sense of authority” as they accomplish other reading tasks and communicate with professors and students.

This strategy can be applied to assignments in all disciplines. It can be taught by writing teachers in composition

courses, by instructors in ESL workshops, and by tutors in one-on-one conferences. This strategy is part of “basic classroom literacy,” as Pfinstag and O’Hara (1998) call it, which is “the ability to read not only the specific requirements of a prompt, but also the culture of the classroom, which often dictates the audience and purpose for a writing response.” The instructions for an assignment are not always limited to a written prompt. Students must learn to observe their professors and the classroom itself in order to understand the unwritten instructions. Nelson (1995) calls this the classroom situation a “larger ‘text’ that students must interpret and define for themselves.” By teaching students transferable skills, such as the ability to understand writing prompts, teachers give them the resources they need to interpret and participate in the university classroom.

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