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ABSTRACT

A Georgetown University course in English writing for academic purposes for foreign linguistics graduate students is described. The Writing Lab was conceived as a discussion session to accompany two commonly selected linguistics courses in which much writing is required. The initial class consisted of seven Japanese and two Taiwanese students with a variety of English skill levels and skill needs. Faculty teaching graduate linguistics courses were surveyed concerning the kinds of writing required and problems encountered with students of English as a Second Language (ESL). The course's primary objective became general instruction in appropriate accepted academic discourse for writing. Insights for course design were drawn from research in English for special purposes, writing instruction, and second language learning. Syllabus development consisted of pairing writing topics with writing tasks, sequenced to cover stages of the writing process from planning to revision and from short paragraphs to research papers. Some alterations were made in the second offering of the course due to different student needs. The greatest strength of the Writing Lab is seen in the personal contact and individualized work during student-faculty conferences. Appended are a report on a questionnaire survey of writing tasks assigned in linguistics courses, a summary of responses to a graduate writing questionnaire, and the Writing Lab course syllabus. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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WRITING LAB: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TECHNICAL  
WRITING PROGRAM FOR FOREIGN LINGUISTS

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**WRITING LAB: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TECHNICAL  
WRITING PROGRAM FOR FOREIGN LINGUISTS**

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**Introduction**

The growing number of foreign students in the graduate program in Linguistics at Georgetown University has been a positive contributing factor to the diversity of its student population. Efforts to serve the needs of this changing student body have necessitated ongoing adjustments to the graduate linguistics program offerings. Although their foreign language backgrounds are generally an asset in providing their peers with exotic language examples for analysis, significant numbers of these foreign students have also had major difficulties writing coherent, academic English in course exams, papers, comprehensive examinations and dissertations. A number of professors have noticed an overall decline in the quality of the writing done by graduate students in general, but English as a Second-Language (ESL) technical writing done by foreign graduate students remains particularly problematic. The writing produced by these students often seems out of focus, and lacking in organization and clarity. In other words, their writing does not seem to fit the register known as academic discourse in linguistics--evidence of a need for specialized writing instruction for these students.



**Background and Concept of Course**

Traditionally, the Department of Linguistics requires all new non-native English students to take a composition screening test upon entry into Georgetown's graduate linguistics program. Those who pass the test may proceed with their course work; those who fail were customarily sent to the Division of English as a Foreign Language (DEFL) for instruction in academic writing, where they are required to take a composition course with students of many disciplines. The DEFL writing courses may be effective for some students, but because L<sub>2</sub> English writing continues to be problematic for the foreign graduate student population, the Department of Linguistics piloted a new approach in the Fall 1988 semester, placing some of these new students in a specialized writing class: expository writing for graduate students in linguistics.

Given that new students in Linguistics generally take a full course load in addition to working on their writing, the Writing Lab was originally conceived of as a discussion session to accompany one of two classes considered to be likely first-semester choices for new students: Introduction to Applied Linguistics and Language Acquisition. In addition to the advantage of creating a homogeneous group (all graduate students in linguistics, as opposed to DEFL's mixed-disciplines course), having them enrolled in one of two introductory courses provided further uniformity for composition assignments. The normal course requirements of their Introduction to Applied Linguistics

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or Language Acquisition class already involve a fair amount of writing--exams, course papers and the final research paper--all of which served as the Writing Lab's focus. This approach seemed fairer than assigning additional writing assignments in the Lab, a no-credit course.

Dr. David Harris, former Head of the Applied Linguistics program, conceived of the course, and offered me the opportunity of teaching it. I had several planning meetings with Dr. Harris, and with Dr. Richard Lutz and Dr. Peter Lowenberg, the professors teaching Language Acquisition and Introduction to Applied Linguistics, respectively, in which we coordinated some of the assignments and the structure of Writing Lab.

**Needs Analysis and Course Design**

For my needs analysis, I began by making an initial assessment. Nine students were to be in the class: seven Japanese and two Taiwanese. Of the nine, four were enrolled in Introduction to Applied Linguistics (one male and three females), four in Language Acquisition (one male and three females), and one was a student (male) who had unsuccessfully completed the Department's written comprehensive examinations, largely due to his problems in writing. He was thus required to take the Writing Lab as a prerequisite for reattempting his written exams. The students were at various levels: some had excellent command of the spoken language, but could not manage the more formal language of academic prose. Some spoke less well, and had

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problems with lack of cohesion and explicit reference, lack of coordination and subordination, unclear reasoning, and scattered problems with the use of the article, particularly among this group of Asian language speakers.

Dr. Harris and I devised a questionnaire to survey members of the faculty teaching graduate courses in linguistics as to the kinds of writing tasks they required of their students (for the complete results of the questionnaire, see Appendix A). The two principal writing tasks required of graduate students were research papers and essay-style responses to exam questions; also mentioned (although somewhat less frequently) were critical reviews and summaries. Problems that ESL writers most commonly exhibit according to our respondents included (a) taking their own stand (rather than simply citing authority), (b) framing a research question, (c) maintaining a coherent argument, and (d) referring to sources (direct quotations, paraphrases, citations) --all of which may be considered primary needs for this target group. The overall objective of the course, inferred from the survey, became general instruction in appropriating accepted academic discourse for writing, or developing a stylistic competence for writing in linguistics. This would place Writing Lab in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

A significant contributor in ESP has been Henry Widdowson, beginning with his pivotal article "EST in Theory and Practice,"<sup>1</sup> where his focus is on English for Science and Technology (EST), the first major area of development in EST. In this work, Widdowson underscores the importance of making instruction in EST communicative and based on language use in the discipline, going beyond merely learning a set of structures or a specialized lexicon representative of the type of discourse the students will be expected to need in their studies. He schematizes effective EST instruction as a "three-way translation" (1975: 7) involving two primary tasks: (1) **comprehension**, wherein the students' knowledge of their field is used to construct a non-verbal device (such as a diagram or a graph), and (2) **composition**, where students rely on their L<sub>1</sub> familiarity with their field and use a non-verbal device to write a passage in technical English. His rationale is that many EST teachers attempt to teach scientific English without taking into account that their students most likely already have a certain degree of familiarity with the discipline, even though their knowledge of English is deficient. This understanding of their field can be viewed as a "deep structure," which the learners now need to transform into proper English surface structures in a communicative act--report writing, description of a process, etc. They should be making

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, K. and Roe, P., eds. 1975. English for Academic Study: with special reference to Science and Technology. London: The British Council, ETIC. (pp. 3-10).

use of English, not merely learning isolated patterns of English usage. In this manner they will develop their communicative competence in their second language. The concept of communicative language use in the Writing Lab was realized by having authentic assignments from other classes be the focus of the compositions undertaken. Students knew they were not writing in a vacuum--they would be evaluated not only by their writing instructor, but they would receive a grade in their linguistics course for the same paper. The question of dual audience arises here for the student: what if my linguistics professor and the Writing Lab instructor want different things in my composition? In cases such as these, we attempted to structure the paper the way the linguistics professor conceived of the assignment since it was, after all, an assignment for a specific class.

Concerning approaches to composition pedagogy, I have been strongly influenced by Carnicelli's work in developing the conference method of teaching writing. His work has grown out of the school of thought where the teaching of writing focuses on the process, not the product. Students are not expected to produce a perfect first draft; writing is a recursive process of pre-writing, composing a series of drafts, revising, and editing. Also included in his methodology is an approach which avoids alienating the student by overwhelming him or her with too much criticism of surface errors too soon in the process. Errors should be grouped into major areas of difficulty and the writing instructor should point these areas out to the student.



Systematic "red penciling," however, should be held for the penultimate draft, when the student is at the editing/proof-reading stage. Carnicelli's rationales for using the conference method are the following:

- (1) Individualized instruction is more effective than group instruction,
- (2) The teacher can make a more effective oral response to the paper in an oral conference than in written comments,
- (3) The student can learn more from an oral comment than from written comments,
- (4) Conferences promote self-learning,
- (5) The conference method is the most efficient use of the teacher's time (1980: 105-110).

Indeed, the conferences seemed to be the most effective part of Writing Lab. Fortunately, the class size was small enough to allow for frequent private consultation with the students. The luxury of small class size was a positive factor in several ways: it helped "break the ice" with students by allowing for extensive one-on-one time. Some writers are very possessive about their writing and have a hard time trusting their instructor for advice. Furthermore, in the conferences I was also able to focus on text-based, individual concerns that the students had, rather than on general composition techniques. And finally, the students themselves genuinely appreciated the writing conferences, often feeling both encouraged and challenged by the experience.

At the discourse level, another important figure who has influenced my thinking on the teaching of writing and rhetoric to second-language speakers is Kaplan (1966, 1972, and 1976), whose



work in the area of contrastive rhetoric has been both fascinating and controversial. The central idea is that L<sub>1</sub> interference appears in second-language use not only at the lexical and morpho-syntactic level, but also at the rhetorical level in L<sub>2</sub> composition. This is a consequence of logical patterns of argumentation and organization which are culture bound. The implications of Kaplan's work are that L<sub>2</sub> writers need to be made aware of rhetorical differences at the discourse level in order to monitor their writing and control L<sub>1</sub> interference. He describes English expository writing as following an essentially linear type of reasoning, generally deductive or inductive (1966: 4), while the other cultures' means of developing an argument display patterns which are altogether distinct from those of English. Kaplan organizes these alternate methods of development by drawing diagrams of the rhetorical patterns common to several language groups: e.g., English (linear), Semitic (parallelism), Oriental (circular), and Romance (digressive).

Oftentimes, merely exposing bilingual writers to the diagrams Kaplan uses to describe various cultures' patterns of rhetoric is reassuring to them, shedding welcome light on some of their own frustrations in writing in a new language and culture, and helping these writers see problems with their expository prose beyond the sentence level, which, in the case of these L<sub>2</sub> writers, is generally fine.

Again at the discourse level of responding to student

writing, I incorporated some of Bruffee's techniques of descriptive outlining, detailed in his A Short Course in Writing. These are **post hoc** outlines for testing the structure and organization of essays. In this model, the thesis, or "proposition," is identified, and the rhetorical approach, or 'plan,' is made explicit, e.g., "Oppose the proposition, concede a point to the opposition, and then refute the opposition" (1985: 224). Next to each paragraph, Bruffee's descriptive outline instructs students to write what each paragraph says and what it does--a one-sentence summary of the paragraph's content and of its rhetorical function within the composition.

Bruffee's techniques were particularly useful in helping students look at their writing more objectively, not always an easy task. We referred to his descriptive outlines as "diagnostic outlines" because of their usefulness in getting students to see weakness both in content and in organization.

An area that remained problematic for the foreign students was lexical choice and style. Some students revealed in writing conferences that they were so satisfied after simply getting their basic meaning down in passable English that they could not be bothered to worry about word choice. I suggested that they try a little worrying! Precision in capturing exactly the right image, metaphor, or expression comes through practice, and it is particularly difficult when writing in a foreign language. One technique I adopted came from the teaching of literary writing: **interpretive paraphrase**. This is an approach which can be used



at the final stages of composing, focusing on stylistics. Interpretive paraphrase encourages students to scrutinize word choice for proper expression. Students are asked to re-write a particularly problematic section of their text in a paraphrased version. They should then write down what went through their mind as they performed the task, asking themselves questions such as, "How would the meaning change if I used this word instead?" Ideally, a second paraphrase should also be attempted, although this can be especially difficult for L<sub>2</sub> English speakers. For Berthoff, in The Making of Meaning, "interpretive paraphrase is another name for the composing process itself" (1981: 72).

**Syllabus Design and Implementation**

The first semester of Writing Lab met once a week for two hours on Fridays. Counting scheduled holidays and the normal semester's activities, we had a total of twelve meetings in the course, not counting individual conferences with each of the students.

In designing the syllabus (see Appendix B), my initial approach was to make two lists: one of topics in writing (Outlining, Paragraphing, Contrastive rhetoric, etc.), and one of writing tasks (a well-supported paragraph, introductions, essay exams, etc.). I then paired topics and assignments, seeking to establish a sequencing of the material covered from the micro to the macro level--from the planning stages of pre-writing activities, to the process of writing drafts, revising and



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editing, to the finished product, and from short paragraphs to essays, to short papers, ending with a research paper.

This syllabus was followed fairly closely, with a few minor alterations. A major difficulty in keeping the class "integrated," i.e. closely tied to assignments given in the Introduction to Applied Linguistics or Language Acquisition classes, was that the two classes were different in their respective course content and range of assignments, thus necessitating an alternative assignment for students of each class, or abandoning plans to include an assignment that might have been fine for one group but which had no analogous task in the other class. This was the case when I included Summary writing--a task required of students in Introduction to Applied Linguistics--in the syllabus. The students in the Language Acquisition class, however, were not writing a similar assignment at the time, nor did they have to write a true summary throughout the semester. Therefore, instead of assigning summary writing to all of the Lab students (which would have been an unfair burden to those in the other course), we moved that task to the end of the course, when all of the students, involved in writing their research papers, had to do a literature review (or brief summary) for their final papers. This "least common denominator" factor was somewhat of a hindrance on planning the assignments for the Writing Lab.

**Course Evolution**

The second semester of Writing Lab had fewer students (four) than the first, with more of a variety of interests. There were majors in both sociolinguistics and computational linguistics in addition to the two applied linguistics students. This necessitated a change in course design to some extent. It was no longer possible to coordinate writing assignments with a professor of the students' in a single introductory course since no two students had the same class. Alternatively, we decided to have a shortened weekly general class meeting (reduced from two hours to one and a half), and included weekly conferences with each student instead of scheduling conferences only as assignment dates approached. There were some general assignments during the first half of the semester made strictly for Writing Lab, but by the end of the semester, we were working on individual papers assigned the students in any one of their other classes, in an effort to keep their writing communicative and based on real tasks.

**Conclusion**

The greatest strength of Writing Lab lies in the personal contact that students receive in the one-on-one writing conferences. Here it seemed the real learning took place, and attention was given to areas of concern to individual students' real-life writing experience. We discussed the writers' frustrations and pleasures in their writing, we looked closely at



their texts, at their diagnostic outlines, and interpretive paraphrase efforts, and we built a rapport of trust which served well our common goal--developing more effective expository writing as linguists. Furthermore, trouble spots that individuals were interested in working on were more effectively addressed in the conferences. The use of the definite and indefinite article, for example, was a problem that only a few of the students had. I was therefore able to keep it and other minor points of grammar out of the general class, and address the topic in conferences with the appropriate student(s).

One could readily apply the concepts used to develop Writing Lab by devising a questionnaire that would identify general areas of concern for advanced foreign technical writers to be distributed to professionals in the field in question, especially to those who have had direct personal experience working with such L<sub>2</sub> writers. The results of the questionnaire would, in a large measure, contribute to establishing the writing needs of the writers, thus aiding in syllabus design and course planning. In addition, by allowing the luxury of individualized instruction for these writers, the benefits of the writing-conference method would become apparent as the instructor gains the trust of the writers, and as students' technical writing steadily improves.

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REPORT ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY OF WRITING TASKS  
ASSIGNED IN LINGUISTICS COURSES

Recently we sent the faculty of the Department a brief questionnaire concerning the kinds of writing tasks assigned this semester to graduate students. Our objective was to determine whether we are offering appropriate instruction in the departmental writing course for our foreign graduate students, and to make whatever syllabus changes the faculty responses seemed to suggest.

Out of 22 questionnaires sent to the faculty, 18 (82%) were returned. Of these, 4 were not completed because respondents are not teaching graduate students this semester, leaving a total of 14 questionnaires (64%) for analysis.

It should be noted that the faculty were asked to respond separately for each relevant course, and data for some 31 courses were received out of a total of 37 being offered.

The attached sheet gives a detailed summary of responses. It will be observed that

1. The major criteria for the determination of final grades in graduate courses are the following, all being reported for about 50% of the courses: midterm exams, final exams, course papers, homework, and class participation.

2. The principal types of writing tasks, then, are research papers (58% of courses) and essay-style responses to exam questions (48% of courses). (A dozen other types of writing tasks were identified, the most frequent being critical reviews and summaries--16% of the courses for each.)

3. Writing skills which seem to cause foreign students the greatest problems are the following (listed in descending order though they were closely ranked by the respondents): (a) taking their own stand (rather than simply citing authority), (b) framing a research question, (c) maintaining a coherent argument, and (d) referring to sources (direct quotations, paraphrases, citations).

We wish to express our appreciation to the faculty for their cooperation on this project.

David P. Harris  
Eugene P. Vricella

DETAILED SUMMARY OF RESPONSES  
TO GRADUATE WRITING QUESTIONNAIRE

Figures in items 1 and 2 of this summary indicate the number of courses (out of 31 reported) for which a particular response was given. Figures in item 3 represent the number of faculty members (out of a total of 14) who made a particular response.

1. In your Fall semester courses attended by graduate students, what kinds of writing tasks will you assign?

- 18 Research papers
- 15 Essay-style exam questions
- 5 Critical reviews
- 5 Summaries
- 9 Other: Languages problems; Computer programs; Essays evaluating concepts; Journal writing; Lesson plans; Program documentation; Essays comparing two class observations and peer-taught lessons; "Squibs" (syntactic argumentation); Technical writing--descriptive grammars; Lab reports.

2. What particular kinds of tasks provide the basis for the final grade in your courses?

- 17 Midterm exam
- 17 Final exam
- 16 Class participation
- 16 Course papers
- 14 Homework assignments (problems, exercises)
- 4 Other: Quizzes; Course project involving computer systems; peer-teaching.

3. Are there specific writing skills which seem to cause particular trouble to your foreign graduate students--beyond those relating to the use of grammatical and idiomatic English?

- 10 Taking their own stand--rather than simply citing 'authority'
- 9 Framing a research question
- 8 Maintaining a coherent argument
- 7 Referring to sources--direct quotations, paraphrases, etc.
- 6 Other: Limiting matter to a single topic for in-depth research; Master's Research Paper; Synthesizing Information--forming generalizations; Conventions for technical writing.

Writing Lab

COURSE SYLLABUS

- I. Sep. 02 - Getting started.
- II. Sep. 09 - Analyzing the writing task.
- III. Sep. 16 - Finding a way into topic; Outlines.
- IV. Sep. 23 - Paragraphs/Paragraphing; Summaries.
- V. Sep. 30 - **Summary due**; Research Questions.
- VI. Oct. 07 - Revising/Editing.
- Oct. 14 - No Class (Mid-Semester Holiday)  
**Short Paper I due.**
- VII. Oct. 21 - Contrastive Rhetoric; Essay-writing/Test taking.
- VIII. Oct. 28 - **Short Paper II due**; Course Papers.
- IX. Nov. 04 - Reference Sources/Bibliographies.
- X. Nov. 11 - **Short Paper III due**; Research Papers.
- XI. Nov. 18 - Proof Reading; Research Papers continued.
- Nov. 25 - No Class (Thanksgiving Break)
- XII. Dec. 02 - **Research Paper due**; Review.