

English for Academic Purposes in an Online Writing System

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Abstract: Novice and non-native postgraduate students always face a number of difficulties in the complexity in academic English writing. However, they are seldom taught the effective strategies to regulate their writing processes. This research intends to develop an academic writing course incorporating an online writing system for postgraduate students to develop their metacognitive genre awareness. In the four metacognitive stages, the postgraduate students are assigned different kinds of writing tasks. All of their writing products, such as drafts of thesis proposal, final version of thesis proposal, self-reflections, are recorded and observed in the online writing system.

Key words: Online writing system, EAP, online learning, academic writing

1. Introduction

English proficiency has become a key factor for learners to succeed in pursuing their higher education. It is reported that more than 65% of international academic journals are written in English (Johns, 1993). In response to the needs of English learning, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses are dramatically increasing. A genre-based approach is an effective way to improve writers' genre-awareness in EAP instruction (Fortanet, Posteguillo). It explicitly and systematically explains to writers how languages work in a social context, how texts are structured, and why they are written in the ways they are. Hyon (2001) concluded that "genre-knowledge gained through explicit instruction can be remembered by EAP students over an extended period of time and facilitate aspects of L2 reading and writing" (p. 434). Swales' (1990, 2004) CARS (Create a Research Space) model is regarded as the most influential EAP genre analysis framework. It sheds light on the structural organizations and the academic writing conventions. According to Swales (1990), any introduction to research articles (RAs) consists of three obligatory moves, which include move 1—establishing a territory (establishing the topic), move 2—establishing a niche (justifying the present study), and move 3—occupying a niche (describing the present study). Each move can be further divided into a number of steps, which are hierarchically organized in distinct sections.

Writing Master's thesis is a demanding task that requires sophisticated linguistic knowledge and is a tough process for novice writers. Therefore, students should be taught the effective metacognitive strategies to regulate their writing processes. Wenden (1991) claimed that metacognition plays an important role in effective learning because learners are equipped with the abilities to *plan, monitor, evaluate, and revise* their cognitive and mental activities. Xiao (2005) indicated that the differences between mature and immature writers lie in the awareness of metacognition. EFL unskilled writers know little about writing knowledge and strategies, while skilled writers extensively undergo the processes

of self-regulation and metacognitive control (Flower, 1990; Kellogg, 1996). Moreover, writing is not merely considered as an individual work; instead, it is supported by feedback from peers who effectively review texts, see logical gaps, identify problems in the organization, and most importantly, improve the writing products (Vass, Littleton, Miell & Jones, 2008). The aim of this study is to identify how L2 students develop their genre awareness in an online writing system.

2. Design of the Academic Writing Course and the Online Writing System

The design of both the academic writing course and the online writing system is based on the theory of metacognition, which includes four processes—planning, monitoring, evaluating, and revising. Each student's metacognitive processes and writing products can be preserved and observed in the online writing system. In the planning stage, the postgraduate students are required to analyze three moves in research paper introductions according to Swales' CARS Model. They identify the moves and steps and denote them numerically at the end of each sentence of the research paper in the function *Post a New Essay*. In the monitoring stage, they have to apply the generic features that they have discovered and learned from analyzing research paper introductions to compose their own thesis proposals. Then, they post their drafts and final thesis proposal in the function *Post a New Essay*. In the third stage of evaluating, the students are asked to edit peers' proposals in terms of the generic features and the text organization. In the function *Suggestion to Global Revision*, a list of suggestion types in the text organization is provided, and the definitions and examples for each suggestion type are also provided for students to look up. In the revising stage, the students have to decide which advice provided by their peers should be accepted or rejected in order to revise their proposals. They can look up peers' comments in the function *View Different Versions* and decide whether or not to take them. Both the local revisions (e.g. grammatical mistakes) and the global revisions (e.g. logic and organization) are shown in the system.

Conclusion

In the context of EAP, the genre-based approach provides L2 learners with an explicit chance to undertake writing tasks and to cultivate genre awareness. Genre awareness is closely connected with metacognitive strategies, which can help learners *plan, monitor, evaluate, and revise* their learning in a way that directly improves writing performance. Moreover, peer review in CSCL provides students with the opportunity to meaningfully use language to write to real audiences. In order to investigate how L2 students develop their genre awareness, the academic writing course and the online writing system are designed based on four stages of metacognition.

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