Human Rights as an Introduction to Academic Research

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Abstract
Being asked to conduct academic research comes as a shock for many undergraduates, especially when the research is to be conducted in a second language. This paper puts forward an engaging and practical method of introducing research theory and practice to undergraduate students participating in an intensive English for academic purposes program at an international university. The research is couched in a human rights context, therefore serving the dual purpose of exposing students to the wider world and the human rights issues that many people face globally. Students are required to research a country's human rights record based on Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. Having researched their country, they then use a process writing approach to produce a minimum 1,200-word term paper, incorporating evidence from academic sources to support their findings and conclusions. Understanding what human rights are, where to find reliable information, and how to analyze and use evidence in their writing all present a steep learning curve for students; however, they are carefully guided through each stage of the process with handouts, explanations, and exercises before applying those same skills to their term paper. This paper will be of interest to teachers (EFL or otherwise) interested in developing their students' understanding of human rights and introducing their students to the practice of academic research.

Keywords: Introduction to Academic Research, Human Rights, Critical Thinking, Process Writing, English for Academic Purposes

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Introduction

Many students entering higher education have never written an academic research paper before. As a result, they do not usually possess the necessary skills to critically analyze and evaluate the information they find and then write an academic essay discussing their findings with correctly cited and referenced evidence, especially in a second language. This is critical as deficiencies in any of these areas, not just language skills, can have a detrimental impact on students' education and prevent them from achieving their full potential.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to present a project that we have been using at Mahidol University International College's Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics to introduce our students to their first experience of academic writing. As an intensive English program for students wishing to raise their level of English to one at which they might be able to cope with higher education at an international university, our primary goal is to improve our students' English. However, we have two other important objectives; we also want to provide them with the academic skills they will need in order to meaningfully comprehend, analyze, and respond to what they learn in class and to empower them with a greater understanding of the world at large and how we as individuals fit into the big picture.

Human rights are a key concept that everyone should understand and value if we are to make progress as a race. However, human rights is a complex topic and so must be broken down into a more manageable set of ideas, a framework that guides research and response as espoused by Benjamin Bloom and Lois Broder (1950), as well as Marcia Heinman and Joshua Slomianko (1985). Therefore, rather than using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' full 30 articles as the basis for the paper, the assignment is designed around the Four Freedoms concept first introduced by Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1941 speech to U.S. Congress in an attempt to appeal to the American people's sense of humanity and convince them to join World War II. In his speech, he referred to four basic human rights, all of which were being violated at the time across the rest of the world: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

The project described in the following paper provides a highly structured introduction to academic writing and guides students through every step of the research and writing process using the Four Freedoms framework, around which they structure their research and their response to the assignment. As a result, we have observed significant improvement in our students' understanding of and ability to produce academic writing. In addition to this, the project also has a dramatic impact on their critical thinking skills and their ability to organize their thoughts and write a coherent and supported report of their findings. Finally, the project also necessarily requires that students learn about different social issues and come to a greater appreciation of reality and their place in the world by asking them to research, analyze, and report on a specific country's human rights situation in terms of the Four Freedoms.

Literature review
The traditional linear model of process writing involves brainstorming, outlining, writing and reviewing (prewriting, writing, and revising). However, there is significant disagreement as to just how linear the process really is (Flower & Hayes, 1981), and, if in fact the process is in no way linear, whether we can ever really hope to fully understand how the brain processes information and produces good writing (Cooper & Holzman, 1983).

Indeed, Charles Stallard (1976), in his paper Composing: A Cognitive Process Theory, sums up the writing process in this way:

> The initial search of cognitive structure promotes a chain of events. The result is a series of searches, each going deeper and becoming more thoroughly exhaustive of the potential within the changing cognitive structure. These searches will continue until little new change in the message or concept is evident. When the changes cease to be evident, the writer can proceed with the business of encoding the message into a communicable form. (p. 183)

Stallard (1976) goes on to say, "It is only at this point, and not before, that consideration must be given to organization, style, and method of paragraph development" (p. 183), but I would argue that this same process also happens at the paragraph, sentence, and even individual word level as writers seek to convey their message precisely through carefully chosen words, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and essays. In other words, the big picture gradually, step by step, narrows the focus, but then the final detail must complete the circuit and match up with the big picture, which may in turn also change (at the sentence, paragraph, or essay level) as a result of the thought processes behind explaining and supporting an idea.

The process of writing seems to be an organic one in which the writer delves deeper into their thought processes, but must invariably return to their starting point in order to close the loop and confirm the logic of their development. All of this must depend on so many external and internal influences that, in fact, it would seem impossible to compartmentalize and delineate each stage of the process.

Stallard (1976) seems to agree with this hypothesis, saying, "Composing is a product of creative capabilities of the mind and complicated beyond understanding or analysis" (p. 181). This view is also supported by Richard Gebhardt (1983), in his paper Writing Processes, Revision, and Rhetorical Problems, in which he states, "The processes of writing are sufficiently complex, and sufficiently variable from writer to writer that they cannot be reduced to simple formulas" (p. 296). I would argue that this search for ideas and structure is actually a critical thinking process rather than a writing process, and is utilized throughout the writing process as good writers continually revisit goals, ideas, structure, development, grammar and mechanics, and revise what they have written.

Therefore, it would seem that the traditional linear model of process writing, in which the process is blocked off into separate, identifiable stages has been largely disproven. According to Gebhardt (1983), "Researchers investigating the nature of audience awareness, the operations of revision, and the cognitive processes within writing as a

whole all agree that identifying the rhetorical problem is central in the writing process," (p. 295). However, "identifying the rhetorical problem" is the foundation of critical thinking, in which case our students may achieve better results if we combine the key elements of critical thinking with the structure of the writing process.

Researchers and educators really began to take an interest in and conduct serious investigation into critical thinking and problem solving in the 1950s, when B. S. Bloom and L. J. Broder (1950) studied the differences between successful and unsuccessful graduate students. What they found suggested that there are four essential characteristics/approaches that predicted student success:

1. Understanding the nature of the problem
2. Understanding the ideas contained within a problem
3. Being systematic in their approach
4. Being enthusiastic towards the task of solving the problem

Similarly, in their book Critical Thinking Skills, Marcia Heinman and Joshua Slomianko (1985) defined critical thinking as "raising questions, breaking up a complex idea into smaller components, drawing upon prior knowledge, and translating complicated ideas into examples" (p. 8). Heinman and Slomianko (1985) also emphasize the Learning to Learn System, which was one of the most comprehensive thinking-improvement programs available at the time, according to Krapp (1988). The Learning to Learn System contains three stages, "the input stage, the organization stage, and the output stage," (Heinman & Slomianko, 1985, p. 16), and a general guidelines section (p. 19). The guidelines encourage teachers to:

1. make critical thinking skills relevant
2. make learning an active process
3. show students the big picture and how to break a complex idea into components
4. focus on the process, not on memorization and
5. reinforce students for appropriate performance

If we accept that the idea of writing being a strictly linear process is largely unrealistic and that critical thinking plays a key role in determining when and how writers "plan, translate, and review" (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p.376), we must look for ways of encouraging students to practice and improve these skills in a context that gives them a certain degree of freedom, but also provides structure and feedback along the way. This is where a highly scaffolded project allows us to tackle each stage of the critical thinking and writing processes by introducing the underlying concept students will be dealing with and then helping them to divide a complex whole into more manageable 'jigsaw pieces,' as supported by Heinman and Slomianko (1985), before we then start to structure, develop and support ideas in the form of a written composition - the term project.

The project

The approach we have taken is to assign our students a 1,200-word research paper designed and scaffolded around the Four Freedoms framework. Having this underpinning framework allows the teacher to introduce the project to the class as a whole before students are then assigned their individual countries to research. As a result, students better understand the nature of the problem (human rights) and the individual ideas (rights) involved, these being the first two determinants of student success as stated by Bloom and Broder (1950). In other words, having the Four Freedoms framework enables us to pre-teach the "big picture" as espoused by Krapp (1988), before helping students to comprehend the concept by breaking the complex whole into more manageable parts (Heinman & Slomianko, 1985).

The first two weeks of the ten-week course are spent introducing the broad concept of human rights and the Four Freedoms that will be the guiding framework for their research through graded readings, lectures, videos, presentation projects, and discussions. This enables us to introduce and explain the issue of human rights and key vocabulary to the class as a whole and help them to understand what each of the Four Freedoms might encompass in terms of the situation inside any particular country.

Once the students have a reasonable understanding of the underlying concept of human rights and how different social issues might be categorized in terms of the Four Freedoms, they are given a detailed explanation and timeline for the whole project together with a highly structured but flexible example outline. The outline includes recommended sources and guiding questions for each paragraph of their essay to help them research, assess, organize, explain, and support their paper with pertinent and reliable information, correctly cited and referenced using APA 6th Edition formatting. When the teacher has explained the outline and shown an example paper, the students are each given a specific country to begin researching in order to ascertain which of the Four Freedoms are an issue.

However, before they commit too much time and effort to writing their essays, we first ask them to submit a source analysis document at the end of week two in which they analyze five or more sources that they might use in their paper. This source analysis document asks them to summarize the information, identify key opinions and facts that they may wish to use in their paper, assess the quality of the sources, and identify the organization, author, and date, which they will need for their citations and references. Once their advisor has approved their source analysis document and given feedback on what they may want to omit, include, or improve, the students can then start to develop a more detailed outline, which is due at the end of week three.

The essay structure as described in the outline includes an introduction paragraph explaining what human rights and the Four Freedoms are and why they are so important, ending with a thesis statement stating the country they will be assessing and which of the Four Freedoms it has problems with. This is followed by a background paragraph explaining the general character of their country, including any major influences on human rights, such as the geography/climate, level of prosperity, and the political/religious system of governance. The body paragraphs might constitute an individual paragraph for each of the Four Freedoms or multiple

paragraphs for just one Freedom, depending on what information the students find. The concluding paragraph then summarizes the main findings and makes any pertinent observations, predictions, or recommendations that the student feels add weight to their paper.

After feedback on their outline concerning which of the Four Freedoms the student wishes to write about, the organization they have chosen, and the supporting evidence they intend to use, they are instructed to start writing their essay. They submit a total of three drafts to Turnitin.com to check for similarity with previous papers and online material, with their final draft due in week nine of the course. This gives most of them their first opportunity to see the consequences of plagiarism, intended or otherwise, which is one of the fundamental purposes of the entire project, and it gives their instructor multiple opportunities to give feedback on content and organization, supporting evidence, citations and references, and language control.

Discussion

Having run this project for the last 18 months, we have seen the potential of it in terms of students understanding the value of academic research and being able to produce a reasonably good first attempt at an academic expository essay.

Although there is significant disagreement as to how well we understand the thinking process that goes into an effective piece of writing (Gebhardt. 1983), we must still attempt to provide a structure that hopefully ensures our students comprehend the topic and what is being asked of them, and provides multiple opportunities along the way to receive feedback and review as appropriate.

The idea that writing is a purely linear process with each stage clearly compartmentalized and distinct, I would argue, only makes sense with a timed handwritten essay under exam conditions, where it is hard to go back and alter what has been written, in which case careful planning beforehand and time at the end to review are vital, but necessarily separate stages. In the wider context of academic writing, however, where students do the majority of the writing in their own time on a computer, the process is much more organic and influenced by multiple factors at unpredictable stages in the process. Indeed, Flower and Hayes (1981) claim that writing is actually a hierarchical set of thinking processes that "may be called upon at any time and embedded within another process or even within another instance of itself" (p. 375). Similarly, Faigley and Witte (1981) conclude that writers constantly move back and forth between the different processes of writing. This idea that writing has so many complex, personal, and unpredictable influences and processes that it seems impossible for us to ever really understand the process instinctively feels more logical than the traditional linear model of writing.

If, as Gebhardt (1983) asserts, "identifying the rhetorical problem" (p. 295) is the key to good writing, students must employ critical thinking in order to achieve this. This is where the human rights project comes into its own as the first week or two are devoted to ensuring that students understand the general concept and the Four Freedoms, which they then use to filter and categorize the information they find. In other words, the project ensures that students understand the nature of the problem and the ideas therein and are given a systematic way of approaching, analyzing,

categorizing, explaining, and supporting their findings with facts/statistics, expert opinions, and examples. As a result, the project fulfills the first three of Bloom and Broder's (1950) determinants of student success: understanding the nature of the problem and the ideas it contains, and having a systematic approach to the process (although the fourth determinant, student enthusiasm, we have much less control over).

Similarly, the project also satisfies Heinman and Slomianko's (1985) critical thinking goals of "raising questions," (What are human rights and why are they important?), "breaking up a complex idea into smaller components," (the Four Freedoms and, additionally, what each Freedom may include), "drawing upon prior knowledge" (primarily imparted by the teachers during the first two weeks of the project), and then "translating complicated ideas into examples" (p. 8) (such as specific examples of human rights violations under one or more of the Freedoms in a particular country).

Finally, the project also adheres to the Learning to Learn system's three stages: the input stage (introductory materials and activities related to human rights and the Four Freedoms), the organization stage (the structured and detailed outline), and the output stage (regular feedback and guidance at multiple milestones throughout the process). However, it also meets all of the Learning to Learn system's general guidelines as it "makes critical thinking skills relevant, it makes learning an active process, it shows students the big picture and then how to break down a complex idea into components, it focuses on the process, not on memorization, and it reinforces students for appropriate performance" (Heinman & Slomianko, 1985, p. 19). In other words, by encouraging critical thinking, providing a highly structured framework and outline, and requiring students to constantly review their work, the project effectively combines critical thinking and the writing process, and also makes students more aware and appreciative of the world in which they live.

Conclusion

In summary, the project achieves all three of our stated objectives. The language students gain and practice throughout the process achieves our first objective of raising their level of English. In addition, the framework and highly structured process teach them the value of critical thinking and the academic process of supporting opinions with evidence in a correctly referenced paper. Finally, the fact that the project is based on human rights worldwide forces them to consider the plight of others and, hopefully, reflect on their own situation, as a result.

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