

Towards Better Teaching of Theme Writing: Suggestions Drawn from the Student Survey and the Students' Words of Advice

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By conducting the Teaching Effectiveness Survey and obtaining students' words of advice to those who take Theme Writing in the future, this preliminary study aims to identify the aspects of the author's Theme Writing class at International Christian University that require revision, to shed light on the areas and processes of Theme Writing that students see difficulties in, and consequently to suggest how changes could be implemented in her class. Findings from the analyses of data suggest that the content of each lesson be refined to provide a more stimulating and practical learning environment, that more attention be paid to enhance collaborative learning and community building, and that a framework be provided to get students to start early. The limitations of this study and its implications for future studies will be touched on as well.

Theme Writing (TW) is a compulsory sophomore course in the English Language Program (ELP) at International Christian University (ICU) that meets twice a week for one term and is “designed to prepare students to write a documented research paper” (English Language Program, 2009, p. 9). The course builds on what the students learned during their freshman ELP, and covers topics and skills such as topic selection and narrowing, library research, note-taking, referencing, synthesis of information, critical evaluation of sources, incorporating material into the text, the structure of an introduction/conclusion, and MLA research paper format (English Language Program, 2009). By the end of the term, students are required to write an academic research paper of 1,500 to 2,000 words, citing at least eight sources written in English that constitute the majority of sources used for the paper (English Language Program, 2009). Students write several drafts and confer with their instructor several times before submitting their final papers. Through the entire process, TW aims to prepare students for the academic work in their majors and to equip them with the basic skills for writing their senior theses in English—according to Riney (2002), 37% of the senior theses listed during 1997-2000 were written in English.

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Being aware of the high failure rate for TW, many students seem to be under pressure to pass this course. As one student aptly put it at the last class meeting of the author's class, "I understand why many people fail this course because the requirement is quite different from my freshman ELP classes." Interestingly, however, some alumni seem to appreciate TW in terms of its usefulness not only during their undergraduate academic work but also after graduation. They recommend that TW should be continued as a course with its high standard; they have realized that what they learned in TW has been used not only in academic fields but also in various kinds of work and institutions (Moriya, 2006). They admit that taking TW helped them to write research papers in Japanese as well (Yoshioka, 2002), and an ICU-graduate lawyer states that what he learned in TW has been useful for his career as well as for taking the bar examination (International Christian University, 2005).

At the beginning of each term, the instructors of TW receive the course syllabus written by the TW coordinator, in which the course schedule, class content, and reading and writing assignments are specified. Each instructor is allowed to adapt the syllabus to reflect his or her particular teaching style and goals instead of being required to follow exactly what is written in the syllabus. In fact, instructors are "encouraged to be innovative and incorporate new ideas into their theme writing classes, as long as they stay within the guidelines" (English Language Program, 2009, p. 10). Detailed lesson plans are left to the discretion of each instructor as well. In the author's class, out of 18 possible class meetings, ten, including one library session, were devoted to class meetings, where both mini-lessons and pair/group work were conducted. The remaining eight were allocated for tutorials, where each student received at least three 15-to-20 minute sessions throughout the term. As an instructor who was teaching TW for the first time, the author reflected on her lessons by writing teaching journals after each lesson, and compiled her ideas of how differently she would conduct each lesson in the following terms. Uncertain whether her reflections were valid, the author conducted a preliminary survey of her TW students.

The first purpose of this paper is to explore and identify the areas in which the author's teaching could be improved by analyzing the results of the Teaching Effectiveness Survey (TES) conducted during the last class meeting in spring term 2009. The second purpose is to elucidate the areas and the processes in which the students find difficulties by conducting qualitative analyses on the words of advice the students wrote for future TW students. By compiling the findings from the two types of data, ways to make her class more practical and stimulating for the benefits of students will be discussed. This paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Which aspects of the author's class are students most/least satisfied with?
2. Which areas and processes of writing a research paper do students find difficulties in?
3. How could the author's class be improved to enhance students' learning?

Methods

Participants

A total of 16 ICU students (six male and ten female) who were present at the last class meeting of the author's TW in spring term participated in the study. Among them, 15 students were in their second year of study and taking TW for the first time, and one senior student was taking TW for the second time. All 16 students participated in the TES, and 15 students participated in giving words of advice.

Procedure

Both types of data were collected in the last class meeting of the author's TW class on June 9th, 2009. After submitting their final papers at the beginning of the class, the students were first instructed to write a paragraph on their advice to future TW students (7 minutes). The students then shared their thoughts in groups of three or four, discussed and then agreed on the three most important pieces of advice as a group (15 minutes). Each group briefly presented their three pieces of advice to the class (10 minutes). The students then handed to the instructor their writing, both individual and group, with their names on it.

After conveying the final message from the instructor to the students (10 minutes), the instructor explained the procedure for the TES to the students. It was explained that the survey would be conducted anonymously and that since the survey results would be disclosed only after the grades were submitted by the instructor, the students' answers to the survey would not affect their grades. After the instructor left the classroom, the students started completing the survey. A student volunteer collected the survey sheets, put them in an envelope, and handed it to the ELP office. Approximately one week after the TES took place, the survey results were handed to the instructor after she submitted the students' grades.

Questions Asked in the TES

The survey consisted of 12 multiple-choice questions on a four-point scale and four short-answer questions. The multiple-choice questions had two parts: six questions (Q1-Q6, see Table 1) about the class and six questions (Q7-Q12, see Table 2) on the instructor. The responses to the multiple-choice questions were converted to scores (4: strongly agree, 3: agree, 2: disagree, 1: strongly disagree), and the average score for each question was

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calculated. Four short-answer questions were used to obtain further information on the students' perspectives of the course and the instructor. The four questions were on (a) the goals the students had had for this course, (b) the most stimulating aspects of the course, (c) possible areas for improvement, and (d) issues on physical environment. All of the multiple-choice and short-answer questions in this survey were taken from the sample TES obtained from the ELP office.

Questions Asked to Seek Words of Advice for Future TW Students

The instruction to the students was to write a paragraph giving words of advice to the future TW students. In order to provide clues as to which aspects to write about, several questions were listed for reference as well. The questions were as follows: a) How was TW different from your freshman ELP courses? b) Which processes and aspects did you find most difficult in writing an academic paper? and c) If you were to take this course again, what would you do differently/in the same way? It was made clear that the students' advice should not be limited to the answers to these questions. The students' paragraphs were divided by content into parts and grouped into eight categories labeled by the author. Subsequently, the frequency of each category was calculated.

Findings

Responses to the Questions About the Class in the TES

Out of the six questions about the class, answers to Q4 (whether there were sufficient opportunities for student participation) scored the highest (3.81). On the other hand, Q6 (whether the class activities helped the students to learn) scored the lowest (3.44), with the responses to Q3 (whether the course stimulated the students' interest) and Q5 (whether the course helped the students to develop their academic writing skills) scoring the second lowest (3.56). These results imply that the content of the in-class activities in the author's class could be improved to help the students' learning and to develop their academic writing skills. Table 1 summarizes the results on the questions about the course.

Responses to the Questions About the Instructor in the TES

Out of the six questions about the instructor, Q10 (whether the instructor responded appropriately to questions and assignments) received the highest average score of 4.00, which

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was followed by the average score of 3.94 for Q8 (whether the instructor conducted the class with enthusiasm). On the other hand, Q9 (whether the instructor encouraged and stimulated class discussion) received the lowest average score of 3.63. The results seem to suggest that the students evaluated the instructor's enthusiasm and diligence positively but saw room for improvement in the way the instructor facilitated class discussion. Table 2 shows the results on the questions about the instructor.

Table 1. Responses to the Questions About the Class

		Strongly Agree(4)	Agree(3)	Disagree(2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Average
Q1	The course goals were clearly presented.	11 69%	5 31%	0 0%	0 0%	3.69
Q2	The grading policy was clearly presented.	10 63%	6 38%	0 0%	0 0%	3.63
Q3	The course stimulated my interest.	9 56%	7 44%	0 0%	0 0%	3.56
Q4	There were sufficient opportunities for student participation.	13 81%	3 19%	0 0%	0 0%	3.81
Q5	The course helped me develop my academic writing skills.	10 63%	5 31%	1 6%	0 0%	3.56
Q6	The class activities helped me to learn.	8 50%	7 44%	1 6%	0 0%	3.44

Table 2. Responses to the Questions About the Instructor

		Strongly Agree(4)	Agree(3)	Disagree(2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Average
Q7	The instructor conducted the class with enthusiasm.	15 94%	1 6%	0 0%	0 0%	3.94
Q8	The instructor taught in a way that helped my understanding.	14 88%	2 13%	0 0%	0 0%	3.88
Q9	The instructor encouraged and stimulated class discussion.	10 63%	6 38%	0 0%	0 0%	3.63
Q10	The instructor responded appropriately to questions and assignments.	16 100%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	4.00
Q11	The instructor managed class time appropriately.	13 81%	3 19%	0 0%	0 0%	3.81
Q12	The instructor provided opportunities to answer questions outside of class.	13 81%	3 19%	0 0%	0 0%	3.81

Responses to the Short Answer Questions in the TES

In response to the first short-answer question of what the students' goals for the class at the beginning of the term had been, out of the total response of 12, seven (58%) answered that

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they had wanted to improve their writing in general, and four (33%) answered that they had wanted to improve academic writing skills. When asked whether their goals were fulfilled, seven (58%) out of 12 students answered “yes,” two (17%) answered “a little,” and one (8%) answered “no.” One student wrote that more writing activities could be done in class.

The question about the stimulating aspects of the course received nine responses. Three students (33%) wrote that tutorials were most stimulating. The remaining six responses were given by six different students (11% each). These included: (a) the talk about the instructor’s experience of writing, (b) group discussion on writing, (c) the lesson on citation skills, (d) the lesson on plagiarism, (e) the lesson on the organization of the paper, and f) the lesson on writing from the reader’s point of view.

As for areas for improvement, a total of eight responses were obtained. Two (25%) suggested that more opportunities for peer review be given, and two (25%) wrote that there was no need for improvement. One student (13%) suggested more time for both class and tutorial, and another student (13%) suggested less discussion. In response to the last question about the physical environment, one student out of the total of five responses (20%) answered that arranging the chairs in a half-circle made it easier for students to participate in discussion.

Students’ Words of Advice to the Future TW students

Overview of the types of advice. To obtain a bird’s-eye view of students’ advice, a total of 12 pieces of advice obtained from four groups (three pieces from each) will be first examined. Four (33%) were about topic selection and sources. In light of the increased number of required sources written in English compared with those in freshman courses, the students advised choosing a topic with adequate number of sources in English. They also emphasized the importance of finding the sources early to prepare for writing. Three (25%) were about the writing process and self-management. The students advised starting the work early, being diligent, and managing their time effectively because the work is more independent than in freshman year. Two pieces of advice (17%) were about the importance of tutorials, and of listening to the instructor’s advice. Another two (17%) were related to the organization of the paper. The students emphasized the importance of organization in writing a long paper and advised carefully writing an outline and trying mindmapping (clustering). One (8%) suggested the importance of peer review since this helps students to obtain new ideas and to find mistakes. Please refer to Table 3 for the breakdown of students’ comments after group discussion and their frequency.

Table 3. Topics of Words of Advice Obtained After Group Work

Content	Frequency	%
Topic Selection and Sources	4	33%
Self-management	3	25%
Tutorial	2	17%
Organization	2	17%
Peer Review	1	8%
Total	12	100%

The words of advice to future TW students. A total of 45 pieces of advice were obtained from 15 students, which implies that on average each student gave advice on three different aspects. Eight (18% of total comments; 53% of total participants) were about the difference from the freshman ELP classes. While some did not find much difference from their freshman ELP classes, many pointed out the differences, such as the requirement of a longer and more research-based paper in which deeper exploration of the topic is called for. One student wrote that TW was harder than the freshman ELP courses because she forgot how to write sentences and academic papers in English, as sophomore students do not write English as often as they did in freshman year. Seven (16%; 47%) were about topic selection. The students pointed out the importance and difficulty of choosing the topic of their utmost interest with sufficient sources in English.

Six (13%; 40%) were about tutorials. The students advised using opportunities for tutorials as effectively as possible. The reasons for this included the helpfulness of the tutorials and their increased importance in light of the fact that there are not many class meetings held in TW. Another six (13%; 40%) were about the process of writing. The students advised starting early and obtaining the data and facts before writing. Five (11%; 33%) were on self-management. They emphasized the importance of being independent because of the individual nature of the required work and of managing their schedule since they tended to be lazy.

Four (9%; 27%) were on the use of sources. The students advised thinking of how the sources can be most effectively used and using a variety of sources. Three (7%; 20%) were on searching for sources. The students admitted that searching for sources is one of the most difficult aspects of TW and advised using online databases effectively. Another three (7%; 20%) were on the organization of papers. The students pointed out the importance of paying attention to the logical construction of the entire paper and of constructing the logic in the most persuasive way. Other aspects, each of which was contributed by a different individual, included the importance of peer review, paying attention to citations early in the course, and taking other English courses while taking TW. Table 4 displays the frequency of individual

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students' comments by category.

Table 4. Topics of Students' Individual Words of Advice

Content	Frequency	% of comments (45)	% of participants (15)
Difference from Freshman Writing	8	18%	53%
Topic Selection	7	16%	47%
Tutorial	6	13%	40%
Process of Writing	6	13%	40%
Self-management	5	11%	33%
Sources	4	9%	27%
Search	3	7%	20%
Organizaion	3	7%	20%
Peer Review	1	2%	7%
Citation	1	2%	7%
Other	1	2%	7%
	45	100%	300%

Discussion

The Most/Least Satisfying Aspects of the Author's Class

Findings from the TES seem to suggest that students appreciated the instructor's enthusiasm in teaching the course and giving feedback positively. They also recognized the instructor's efforts in creating a student-centered classroom by providing opportunities for participation and arranging the chairs in a half-circle. On the other hand, the results revealed many areas for improvement in the author's class. The class activities need to be modified and refined to satisfy the students' academic interests and to enhance their writing skills. The way the author facilitates the discussion needs to be more sophisticated as well.

The Aspects and Processes of Writing Which the Students Find Difficulty with

The words of advice unveil the aspects and processes of writing which the students struggled with the most. First, topic selection in light of the increased number of required sources in English seems to be one of the most difficult aspects of TW. The students have to choose the topics which they are interested in, to narrow them down to those that could be written within the given word limit, and to equip themselves with research skills. Even though the students have experienced most of these processes in their freshman year, these increased requirements seem to be a greater hurdle for them to clear. Second, time management and self

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discipline appear to be one of the challenges facing the students. The students see difficulties in managing their time and maintaining their motivation throughout the entire term, which may be why the students advised starting early and warned that the work is more individual in nature. Sophomore students no longer take their classes with their section mates as they did in freshman year; this may have led them to the state of mind in which they do not feel as much of a sense of belonging. The perception that the assignment is more individual in nature could be one of the reasons as well. Third, the students struggled to write a well-organized paper which is longer in length and more research-based in nature. Their struggle seems to be reflected in their words of advice, such as “think about the overall organization and the logical flow of the paper,” “think of where and how to use sources effectively,” and “the deeper exploration of topic is required.” In seeking for solutions, they may have used tutorials as opportunities to ask questions, to obtain feedback on their writing, and to gain an audience’s point of view. These three areas seem to stand as the most difficult aspects of TW for students.

Ways in Which the Author’s Class Can Be Improved

The insights gained through the analyses of two types of data provide clues as to how the author’s TW class can be improved for the benefit of students. The first area lies in the content of each lesson, including activities and the way they are facilitated. Although there were discussion questions—such as the characteristics of a good introduction/conclusion and how summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting can be effectively used—they might have been either too abstract or too straightforward. In addition, some of the mini-lessons might have been a mere repeating of what they had learned as freshmen. In addition to reviewing what the students have learned as freshmen, exposing them to various writing examples for their analyses may enhance their learning and enable them to apply the findings to their writing. The author’s efforts to become a better facilitator are called for, and incorporation of more in-class writing may be worth consideration as well.

The second aspect is to enhance collaborative learning and community building. Providing increased opportunities for peer review may enhance learning in many ways. In fact, Hedgcock (2005) points out that “peer response is embraced by many L1 and L2 practitioners and theorists” (p. 605). Students will be exposed to different ideas and perspectives by receiving feedback from their peers. By reading papers written by classmates, students will not only be exposed to various writing samples but are expected to acquire the reader’s point of view which is one of the essential qualifications to become a good writer. Harmer (2007) claims that peer review has “an extremely positive effect on group cohesion” (p.150) and “encourages students to monitor each other and, as a result, helps them to become better at self monitoring” (p.150). Moreover, students will notice if they are behind schedule and

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whether they need to speed up by realizing where in the process of writing other students are. Exchanging feedback and being engaged in pair/group work would contribute to community building as well, thereby enabling students to have the sense of belonging. The opportunities for peer review, however, may not have been sufficient in the author's class in spring 2009; although students were given feedback from their peers on introductions and titles, no peer feedback was given for longer pieces of writing. Increasing the frequency of class meetings may allow more time for peer review of longer texts with deeper analysis. Additionally, as some instructors do, effective use of Moodle as a means of collaborative learning could be implemented.

The third area seems to be providing a framework for students to start early and stay on schedule. Since students take different paths and processes in writing (Fukao & Fujii, 2002), giving a detailed schedule and having students conform to it needs to be done with caution. With this in mind, it may be worth giving assignments in the first few weeks of the course to help them to start thinking and researching early. Having students write their mind-maps may lead them to think of their topics from various perspectives, and having them submit the sources they have found will get them to do the search for sources. In this way, there will be more opportunities for the instructor to give suggestions earlier in the term. In addition, having students write essay maps in addition to outlines may fill the gap between their outlines and first drafts (Hayashi, 2006; Reid, 2000 as cited in Hayashi, 2006), lead them to think deeper by organizing their thoughts, and provide opportunities for writing in English.

Conclusion

Although preliminary in nature, this study has, to a certain extent, elucidated the characteristics of the instructor's teaching and the students' perception of TW as a course and a process. By qualitatively analyzing the two types of data, the author has sought the ways to make the author's class and teaching more practical and useful for students. The three areas for improvement have been drawn, and modifications will be implemented in the author's class in the future. Obtaining students' feedback on teaching and the course, however, is not the only approach to improve the author's teaching. Rather, it should be balanced with other sources of information. Reading literature on teaching academic writing, sharing ideas on teaching with other instructors, observing their classes, and asking for observers to visit the author's class constitute, among others, viable ways to help the author to grow and to become a better instructor.

Also illuminated in this study is the possibility of using students' words of advice as a window to look into their minds and as a device to further explore their thoughts behind the

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responses given in the TES. By discovering and confirming the difficulties students face, instructors will be able to ascertain the areas in which they need to teach with care and emphasis. Reasons for the students' responses in the TES may be hidden in the message to the future students of TW. In this way, the words of advice have provided valuable hints and clues for the improvement of the instructor's teaching.

This preliminary study has limitations, however. First, due to the small sample size of 15 and 16 students, the generalizability of the findings from this research for the improvement of the author's teaching is limited—what the group of students in this study wrote in the TES may not be shared completely with a different group of students taught by the same author, which calls for increased sample size. Second, although considerable valuable information was obtained through the TES and the words of advice, the questions could be tailored to seek responses for the specific purposes of the study. However, it is also important to listen to the students' voices without making any assumptions, as is noted by Fukao and Fujii (2002), and this remains an area for further investigation. Third, perspectives on tutorials—a very important aspect of TW—are not within the scope of this study. Looking into the ways tutorials are conducted is indispensable for the improvement of the author's class, and thus an area for future study.

This paper has shown the processes and the paths the author took in seeking to become a more skillful and resourceful instructor. She was given countless pieces of advice and ideas for activities by her colleagues, which helped her immeasurably, and to which she would like to show her greatest appreciation. Although the applicability of the findings and implications of this paper is limited, it would be most gratifying to the author if an instructor teaching TW for the first time finds this paper of some use.

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