Changes Made in a Theme Writing Class:
The Importance of Students' Perceptions

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Based on the findings in Hatakeyama (2009), I implemented changes in my Theme Writing classes in the fall and winter semesters of 2009. The changes included: a) sharing of the previous students' words of advice; b) the use of sample papers written by previous students; c) the incorporation of peer review; and d) the discussion of common student errors. Qualitative analyses of the students' comments obtained in the anonymous student survey, conducted in the above-mentioned two semesters, revealed that the students had mixed feelings toward peer review and saw room for improvement in its implementation. It was also found that the students were eager to have more tutorial availability. Implications of the findings are discussed as well.

After one semester of teaching Theme Writing (TW) in the English Language Program (ELP) at International Christian University (ICU), I sought to identify what could be improved in my TW class based on the anonymous student survey conducted at the last class meeting of spring semester 2009 when the students' final papers were due (Hatakeyama, 2009). In order to obtain clues on how the changes could be implemented, I also obtained the students' words of advice for future TW students on the same date as part of the activities in my last class, hoping to elucidate the students' perception of their experience which might be different from that of instructors. The main findings from the analyses of data were: a) the content of each lesson should be modified to add more stimulation and practicality; b) more emphasis should be placed on collaborative learning and community building; and c) a framework should be provided to enable the students to start early in their writing (Hatakeyama). Based on these findings, I made a few modifications in the syllabus and class content in my TW classes of fall and winter 2009.

This paper first describes the modifications made in my TW classes in fall and winter 2009 semesters and then qualitatively analyzes the students' comments written in the student survey taken in fall and winter 2009 semesters to elucidate their perception of the changes implemented, supplemented by the analysis of the students' responses to the questionnaire survey. Finally, it summarizes the findings from the analyses and discusses the issues related to the teaching of TW.

Descriptions of the Changes Made

Sharing of Previous TW Students' Words of Advice

At the first class meeting of TW in each of the two semesters, words of advice from the students who took TW in the previous semester were shared among the new TW students.

After having the students guess the advice given by the previous students, I gave a summary of the advice and quoted some of the students' advice. The primary purpose of this activity was to give the new TW students hints for academic writing and successful completion of the course through the advice from the previous students. In fact, the advice was written from the students' perspectives, covering such areas as tips for topic selection, the importance of coming to class and tutorials, and the ways to organize oneself, which could not be easily replaced by my advice. In short, the words of the students who have successfully accomplished the course are sometimes more powerful and persuasive than those of the instructors.

Use and Analysis of Sample Papers Written by Previous Students

Sample papers written by the previous TW students taken from the TW blog were used more often and in a collaborative manner. At the first class meetings in both fall and winter semesters, I showed the students the titles of the nine well-written TW papers, and the students voted for two sample papers to read and analyze as a class. At the second class meetings, they discussed the strengths and possible areas for improvement of the two papers, first in groups and then as a class. This activity was primarily aimed at helping the students to have a better understanding of what is expected of their final papers in terms of quality, length, and style, enabling them to have a tangible model and goal for their papers and to stimulate them to start early. Later in the course, parts of the sample papers, such as introductions, body paragraphs, conclusions, titles, and work-cited pages, were used for highlighting specific aspects of writing and for discussions as well.

The use of sample papers had a few additional purposes drawn from Hatakeyama (2009). The first was to provide common reading texts for students to enhance community building through group discussion. Due to the fact that there was no common theme for the students' topics or common textbooks, there were no common texts for them to read and discuss otherwise. Besides, since the act of writing an academic paper itself is individual in nature, it was hoped that providing a collaborative learning environment would motivate students to come to class and to continue writing. The second was to provide stimulating and practical lesson content, as analyzing sample papers in groups would stimulate the students' critical thinking ability—this cognitively prepares the students for the peer-reviewing activities described in the subsequent paragraphs as well. The third was to respond to a student suggestion in Hatakeyama (2009) that more in-class reading and writing in English would be beneficial, given the decreased opportunities of exposure to English for sophomore students compared to what they experienced as freshman.

Peer Review

Triggered by the suggestions written by two students in the anonymous student survey (Hatakeyama 2009), I incorporated three peer-reviewing sessions in class: peer review of introductions, first drafts, and full-length drafts. I had also obtained advice from and information on the practices of my colleagues, and had studied the potential benefits of peer review, such as raising the students' awareness of the audience, building skills for analyzing and revising one's writing, contributing to the students' community building, and helping the students to gain confidence by seeing their peers' strengths and weaknesses in writing, by reading the literature on second-language writing as well (e.g. Ferris, 2003; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Hyland, 2002; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Tang

& Tithecott, 1999).

At the class meetings prior to the peer review of introductions, the students discussed the functions of introductions and their basic components as a review of what they had learned as freshmen. Subsequently, the students read a sample introduction, identified each component, such as a hook, background, thesis, and map, and discussed the sample paper's strengths and possible areas for improvement. It was hoped that these activities would prepare students to write their own introductions and to review their peers' writing by bridging the gap between the students' conceptual understanding of academic writing and its application to their own writing. In other words, it was hoped that the analysis of a sample introduction would serve as a springboard for writing their drafts and for peer review. The students were instructed to write their introductions and bring them to the next class for peer review.

On the date of the peer review of introductions, I randomly matched the students into pairs and had them conduct peer review, for which approximately 30 minutes were allocated. During the peer-reviewing activities, I instructed the students to write their feedback on the worksheet adapted from Hayashi (2006) so that they would be naturally conscious of the important elements of introductions and their effectiveness. The students then exchanged the worksheets with their partners, offered oral feedback to supplement their writing, and asked clarification questions. The students who finished early had an opportunity to exchange partners for the second round. The students were instructed to include the worksheets in their final portfolios with their final papers. On later dates, the students met the instructor for tutorials to receive feedback on their introductions.

The peer review of the first drafts and the full-length drafts basically followed similar procedures as have been described regarding introductions. Since the students' drafts had become longer, the time allocated to peer review was lengthened to approximately 40 minutes so that the students would feel less pressed for time. As for the matching of students, students who were at the same or similar stages in writing their drafts were paired up in order to allow for the students' different speed and pace of writing. In order to use the limited time effectively, the writers conveyed to the reviewers which part of their drafts was to be focused on in peer review. Different worksheets were used to get the students to focus on the important aspects of each draft, such as the effectiveness of topic sentences, paragraph structure, citation, conclusions, and titles.

Sharing and Discussion of Common Errors Made by the Students

One thing that I had noticed in the students' papers was that many of the students' grammatical or mechanical errors had some common characteristics, such as the use of transitive and intransitive verbs, prepositions, colons, semi-colons, and compound adjectives. In addition to providing individual feedback to students during tutorials, I started to spend about 10 minutes at the beginning of a few lessons in error-correction activities. Taking one class as an example, I distributed the worksheet with seven sentences, which contained the actual errors that the students made, and had them find and correct the errors. After they compared their answers in small groups, the class went over the answers while confirming the basic rules of each. In most cases, the sentences written by the students were used with modification in content or expressions, and in other cases, sample sentences were taken from various dictionaries with mistakes added.

Other Changes Made

In addition to the four major changes made—the use of previous TW students' advice, the use of sample papers in class, the incorporation of peer review, and the discussion of common student errors—a few minor changes took place as well. First, in order to accommodate the changes in the activities and the class content, I increased the frequency of class meetings from the spring semester's nine to the fall and winter semesters of 11 excluding the librarians' lecture. Second, in order to bridge the gap between the outlines and the first drafts, following Hayashi (2006), I started to have the students write their essay maps between the submission of their outlines and first drafts. It was hoped to make it easier for the students to organize their ideas for their papers in a different perspective from writing outlines and thus to start writing their first drafts. The following section will describe how the student survey was conducted.

Methods

Participants

Thirteen students who attended the last class meeting of fall 2009 semester and 11 students present at the last class meeting of winter 2010 semester participated in the anonymous student survey.

Survey Questions

The twelve multiple-choice questions in the student survey in the fall and winter 2009 semesters were the same as those asked in Hatakeyama (2009). The students circled the answers that best represented their views on a 1-4 Likert Scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Agree, 4= Strongly Agree). These twelve questions were prepared with the aim of obtaining the students' opinions on the overall aspects of the author's TW classes. In the survey conducted in winter 2009, I prepared six additional questions about peer review to seek the students' views on peer review. Appendix A shows the details of the 16 questions. The students were also asked to freely write comments and suggestions, either in English or Japanese, from the following four aspects: a) whether their goals for the course were fulfilled; b) the stimulating aspects of the course; c) the areas for improvement; and d) the physical environment.

Procedure

In both fall and winter 2009 semesters, the students participated in the anonymous student survey after they submitted their final papers, provided words of advice for future TW students, obtained information about the changes made in my TW class since fall 2009 semester, and listened to my final words for the students. While I was explaining the survey procedure to the students, it was made clear that the survey would be conducted anonymously and that the students' answers would not affect their grades since the survey results would be disclosed only after I submitted the grades. I left the classroom after distributing the survey, and a student volunteer collected the survey sheets, put them in the envelope provided, and handed it to an ELP office staff. Upon submitting the students' grades, I received the survey

results.

Analysis

Of the two types of data—those from the multiple-choice questions and from the short-answer questions—the latter, or the students' comments, were mainly used for analysis. Since the purpose of this study was to approach the students' perception of the changes made, the use of qualitative analysis was deemed appropriate. Quantitative analysis of the students' answers to the multiple-choice questions was used only supplementarily to the qualitative analysis. The mean responses of the questionnaire survey obtained in spring, fall, and winter 2009 are shown in Appendix A.

Students' Responses to the Changes Written in the Survey

About the Use of Sample Papers

It seems that the students appreciated the opportunity to read sample papers early in the course and to discuss them with their classmates. One student pointed out the importance of being exposed to the characteristics of good papers: "Reading model essays was quite a good occasion to see what is good writing" (fall 2009). Another student implied that the group and class discussion of analyzing the sample papers contributed to community building and thus motivated him or her to come to class: "Students always had discussions in each class. I spoke in every class with other students, and it is important for me" (fall 2009). A student suggested the possibility that this activity or the extension of it could be beneficial to students: "Thinking of the structure of an essay in the first half of the course by reading model essays helped me to learn. I would like some similar activity with my classmates, using my own essay in the second half of the course" (fall 2009, originally written in Japanese). The students' comments suggest that the use of sample papers was an integral part of the educational process.

About Peer Review

Many students commented that they perceived peer review positively. Some suggested that peer review was stimulating in that they could obtain feedback from multiple perspectives and thus motivated them to come to class: "I enjoyed the peer review the most. It is indispensable part of ELP. The less peer review, the less feedback, and it might result in less motivation to come to class" (fall 2009); "Peer review and other group activity were stimulating" (fall 2009); "Interaction with my friends stimulated me because I can get good advice so as to construct the essay" (winter 2009). Another aspect that some students pointed out as an effect of peer review was that reading their classmates' papers was genuinely interesting: "It was effective to have peer review and class time because it gave me instinctive effect and reading somebody else's papers encouraged me and was very interesting" (fall 2009); "When I get information on how others write their papers in class, I was glad to participate and attend the class" (winter 2009); "We did a lot of peer review and discussions. That was very helpful in writing my essay! Also, it was very interesting to see other people's essay" (winter 2009).

On the other hand, some students shared their concerns regarding peer review. One was

that the feedback from their classmates was not found to be helpful and that his or her own feedback might not be helpful enough for his or her peers: "To be honest, peer review was not very helpful and I'm also afraid whether I could give helpful advice for my peers or not. It was difficult to investigate a paper and find points that need to be improved in such a short time" (fall 2009). A few students hinted that the procedure of peer review has room for change in terms of the balance between peer review and other activities and matching of pairs: "I felt that I want time to discuss in class. Peer review is also important, but it is only say something or only listen to something" (winter 2009); "Throughout the class, I would have appreciated to a fix pair because some classmate's ability to understand what I was writing was not sufficient" (fall 2009). These comments contain valuable sources of information for implementing revisions.

About the Mini-lesson on Common Errors

The students generally appreciated the mini-lesson regarding common errors and small tips for writing despite, or rather perhaps because of the limited time allocated to this activity: "Thanks to the class lecture, we could learn the ways of academic writing and commonly-made errors, which were meaningful" (fall 2009); "Giving small tips and mistakes in writing in class was effective, too, or so I think" (fall 2009); "I wanted to know about the use of comma, colon, and semicolon, so the instruction was easy to understand" (fall 2009); "The class instruction of the way of using comma or semicolon was stimulating. The grammar session was also interesting" (winter 2009); "Some details about writing style were interesting. I didn't pay much attention to them, but after I learn them, my writing became easy to read" (winter 2009). Although this would not be the main focus of the course or the lesson, the students' comments seem to support its effectiveness.

About the Frequency of Class Meetings and Tutorial Opportunities

There were two students who affirmed the increased number of class meetings: "Maintaining this class schedule is appropriate" (fall 2009, originally written in Japanese); "There were less class meetings later in the course, and my motivation went down a little. But I heard that there are less class meetings in other classes, so maybe it was a good balance" (fall, 2009). On the other hand, one student expressed the need of having more tutorial opportunities: "Though class sessions were effective, I thought more chance of tutorial was needed" (fall 2009). Perhaps the students acknowledged the importance of class meetings as long as enough tutorial opportunities are secured and provided.

Three students who took the class in winter 2009 expressed their dissatisfaction that the availability of tutorial time slots was limited: "There was little tutorial available time. Instructor needs to provide more time for tutorial, I feel" (winter 2009); "I want to have tutorial in another time. Availability is few so that I couldn't have time to have tutorial" (winter 2009); "If possible, I would like to go to more tutorials near final paper due date" (winter 2009). The students' dissatisfaction derives from the decreased available time slots in winter 2009 compared to those in fall 2009 due to my teaching schedule. If I have an opportunity to teach this course again in the future, I need to keep these voices in mind.

Questionnaire Survey Results

Most of the mean scores of the questionnaire survey went slightly down from spring

2009 to winter 2009, with exceptions in the responses to Q1 (the course goals were clearly presented: 0.22 point increase); Q3 (the course stimulated my interest: 0.38 point decrease); and Q7 (the instructor conducted the class with enthusiasm: 0.30 point decrease). Another finding that deserves attention is the decrease in the number of respondents—from 16 in spring 2009 to 11 in winter 2009—which implies the higher course failure rate in winter 2009 than in spring 2009.

As for the questionnaire survey on peer review, most of the scores were found to be around 3.0, which indicates that the students had rather positive than negative attitudes towards the incorporation of peer review in class. The highest score was the response to Q15 (giving feedback helped me to revise my paper as well: 3.36), with the second highest being those to Q13 (feedback from my classmates helped me to revise my paper: 3.27) and Q16 (there was enough time for peer review in class: 3.27). The average of the mean scores regarding the peer review (3.17 in winter 2009) was found to be lower than those regarding the course and the instructor obtained in the same semester (3.53 and 3.73 respectively in winter 2009). The details are shown in Appendix A.

Discussion

The analyses of the students' comments seem to suggest that they perceive the use of sample papers as a way to understand the characteristics of a good paper as well as an effective base for class and group discussion, which contributes to group cohesion and motivating them to come to class. The students also valued the mini-lessons on writing tips and the error-correction activities as a means of highlighting the areas that the students had not been aware of. Even though there may be some ways to better implement these activities, the direction of changes on these two activities seems to be well supported by the students.

On the other hand, the use of peer review brought mixed and rather contradicting responses. Many student comments revealed the students' positive attitudes toward peer review, indicating the advantages of receiving multiple and various feedback on their drafts and the genuine interest in reading their classmates' papers. At the same time, however, one student questioned whether receiving and giving peer feedback was a meaningful activity, especially given the limited time for peer review in class. In fact, the mean scores of the responses to the questions on peer review were lower than those on the course and the instructor, which signals that there are many unheard voices that are not entirely favorable of peer review. The sources of the dissatisfaction may lie in a) the perception that the weight on peer review was too high, especially compared to that on teacher feedback; b) the anxiety or the lack of confidence in the students themselves in providing feedback to their peers, partly due to the fact that the students are not accustomed to and thus not comfortable in giving and receiving peer feedback; and c) the quality of feedback that the students received from their peers which was insufficient. In order to mitigate the students' concerns, the following measures could be taken into practice: a) decreasing the frequency of peer feedback and organically connecting it with teacher feedback; b) training of the students before peer review, such as providing linguistic strategies for offering feedback (Hansen & Liu, 2005) and informing/discussing the benefits of peer review (Hansen & Liu) especially for the givers of feedback in addition to the receivers (cf. Lundstrom & Baker, 2009); and c) modifying the grouping or matching of students from random pairs to the grouping based on the commonality of their topics for example. As a matter of fact, many pieces of the students' insightful feedback to their peers, which are, at times, of higher quality than those offered by

the instructor, or myself, are too good to be lost without being shared with. Thus, I hope to find ways to better implement peer review in my class.

In terms of the frequency of class meetings, the students seem to support the current status as long as the present tutorial availability is maintained at the minimum and increased if possible. In fact, the dissatisfaction shown by the students centered on my availability for tutorials especially in winter 2009. Even though each student had at least three tutorials by the end of the semester, the students felt that they wanted to have more opportunities and to receive more teacher feedback if their schedule permitted, particularly toward the end of the semester. The decreased tutorial availability may be one of the causes for the lower mean scores in the student survey obtained in winter 2009 compared to those in spring 2009, as well as the higher course failure rate in winter 2009. Tutorial availability could be one of the means for the students to gauge how much I care about the students. Indeed, seeing the instructors in person and receiving detailed feedback is an invaluable aspect of the course and the ELP, and the students seem to have high expectations of the tutorials. Thus, securing and raising the availability and quality of tutorials might be something to consider in future classes.

Conclusion

Many students have provided constructive and insightful feedback on my TW class, of which I cannot be appreciative enough. In fact, this paper could not have been written without it. Indeed, I have always been impressed with the students' sincere attitudes toward a survey of this kind. Yet, relying only on the voices of the students may impede constructing an accurate image of the instructor's teaching and identifying areas for improvement. Thus, balancing the information from various sources and perspectives is called for. What seems to be especially beneficial for a novice instructor of TW like myself is the deeper understanding of the ELP at ICU, especially of what the students learn as freshmen and how.

What has been reported in this paper has limited applicability, firstly, due to the small size of the participants; secondly, due to the fact that the voices of the students who failed to complete the course were not heard; and lastly, due to the fact that the participants had limited time to complete the survey and thus might not have been able to fully express their thoughts. Moreover, success in one class does not automatically mean that it is applicable to all, for every class and every student is different. As has been seen in the preceding sections, the student survey results show that the students had mixed feelings towards some of the changes and thus imply that the changes were not fully appreciated by them. Still, it is most gratifying if this paper contributes to the accumulation of teaching practices in the ELP.

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Appendix A

Mean Responses of the Student Survey

Survey Questions	Spring 2009 (N=16)	Fall 2009 (N=13)	Winter 2009 (N=11)	Winter -Spring
About the Course				
1 The course goals were clearly presented	3.69	3.69	3.91	0.22
2 The grading policy was clearly presented	3.63	3.38	3.64	0.01
3 The course stimulated my interest	3.56	3.23	3.18	-0.38
4 There were sufficient opportunities for student participation	3.81	3.54	3.64	-0.17
5 The course helped me develop my academic writing skills	3.56	3.46	3.45	-0.11
6 The class activities helped me to learn	3.44	3.31	3.36	-0.08
The Instructor…				
7 conducted the class with enthusiasm	3.94	3.77	3.64	-0.30
8 taught in a way that helped my understanding	3.88	3.62	3.82	-0.06
9 encouraged and stimulated class discussion	3.63	3.38	3.55	-0.08
10 responded appropriately to questions and assignments	4.00	3.62	3.91	-0.09
11 managed class time appropriately	3.81	3.69	3.64	-0.17
12 provided opportunities to answer questions outside of class	3.81	3.77	3.82	0.01
About the Peer Review				
13 Feedback from my classmates helped me to revise my paper	N.A.	N.A.	3.27	N.A.
14 Reading my classmates' papers motivated me to write	N.A.	N.A.	2.91	N.A.
15 Giving feedback helped me to revise my paper as well	N.A.	N.A.	3.36	N.A.
16 There was enough time for peer review in class	N.A.	N.A.	3.27	N.A.
17 Clear instructions were given before peer review sessions	N.A.	N.A.	3.18	N.A.
18 Peer review was a meaningful activity for me	N.A.	N.A.	3.00	N.A.