DEFINING ACADEMIC WRITING

History of ESL Academic Writing
Defining what academic writing is and deciding on the methods to teach it are hard tasks to accomplish and ELT has changed its approach to teaching of academic writing in course of time. Early approaches involved controlled writing moving from paragraph to essay. Starting from 60’s ESL writing moved from controlled writing with emphasis on structure and practice to process method which borrowed a lot from L1 composition research, and later to newer approaches based on research in L2 writing.

Many researchers drew attention to the differences between cultural practices, differences in rhetorical patterns and even differences in logical processes since logic is not something universal. It was observed that different cultures approach logical reasoning and conventions of logic differently. Bizzell (1982) pointed out that the students’ social situations and previous training may hamper their ability to succeed in the academy. For ESL students the gap is even bigger: there are linguistic problems and cultural differences involved. The role of the university level ESL/EFL teacher is to bridge the linguistic and the cultural gap. Whether she is teaching basic writers or highly trained writers, she has to find a way to initiate the students into the culture of the university and at the same time help the students master the language of the discourse community they are heading for.

Approaches to college level English teaching
WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) programs were developed for L1 writers: freshman English teachers and subject teachers collaborating when possible. In such programs, adjunct writing courses are designed for specific courses. For instance, history department considering the needs of this particular discourse community offers a writing course for history students, or students taking a course have to attend an adjunct writing course for 3- or 6 weeks. In such courses students learn the conventions, rhetorical patterns and styles of their own discipline.

Meanwhile, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) was developed for ESL/EFL learners. With a focus on science and technology, ESP was offered as an alternative to general English courses, which usually concentrate teaching English for general life and literary purposes. However, ESP is hard to teach for the English teacher because the teacher has to know the writing conventions of the subject matter in question. It can also be misleading since the English teacher cannot be an expert in those subjects. English teachers cannot and should not be held responsible for teaching writing in the disciplines. Instead the aim should be to create programs that develop
Current applications in academic writing
The common writing assignment in college level ESL/EFL courses is the personal opinion essay in which the student is asked to draw on his personal experience. Be it argumentation, cause and effect or comparison, the student rarely utilizes or analyzes information he obtains from other sources. On the other hand, research has shown that “students will be confronted with either a academic or professional writing task that surface in relation to texts of various kinds (literary, historical, psychological, legal, managerial) or data (computer, laboratory-testing, statistical, chemical)” Schreiber (1987, p.15). In many schools, ours included, writing courses are designed to include text based or data based tasks in which written language acts as a medium for learning something else.

Academic writing tasks for ESL college students

Working with data
Students are led to formulate and test explanatory generalizations, observe and repeat significant details, and generate criteria for contrasting phenomena. Examples of such tasks are the mini weekly or monthly projects as well as the research project done in the second term.

Writing from other texts
Spack (2001) stresses that the most important skill English teachers can engage students in is the complex ability to write from other texts, which is a major part of their academic writing experience. In the same vein, Bizzell (1986) states ‘students’ intellectual socialization may be accomplished not only by interacting with people, but also by encountering the writing of others.”

Bazerman (1980) adds that “we must cultivate various techniques of absorbing, reformulating, commenting on, using reading” if we want to prepare our students to “enter the written exchanges of their chosen disciplines and the various discussions of personal and public interest.”

In short as Spack (1988) aptly puts “To become better writers, students need to become better readers.” Techniques of reading are actually a part of L1 and L2 composition instruction. Marginal notes, note taking, working journals can train students to discover and record their own reactions to and evaluations of a text. (Refer to critical reading and critical writing and combining reading and writing.) For this purpose summarizing, quoting and paraphrasing are skills students should master not only for linguistic purposes but also for analyzing an author’s style and logical reasoning.

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References