
Encouraging Proofreading and Revision

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a lot of interest in learner autonomy. Although many teachers can see the value of encouraging in learners more awareness of the learning process and the ability to make decisions about their learning without the help of a teacher, it is not always immediately clear how to do this. In this practical article, one activity is presented that could be used as part of a classroom language course or implemented in a self-access centre as a way to encourage students to take charge over the academic writing process. By being given the tools to monitor and assess their own work, students are being helped to become independent writers, and in this way, being given greater opportunities for more success in their academic careers.

The role of proofreading and revision

It is generally acknowledged that developing learners' autonomy, or their ability to make decisions about their own learning, is beneficial to their success in learning another language (Benson 2000; Winch 2006). Especially at the tertiary level this is crucial, as no or limited language help may be available while students are expected to be able to express themselves as members of the academic community (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). It is therefore important to help them to develop the ability to continue to improve their writing skills as they progress through the curriculum. One important aspect of academic writing is the ability to critically reflect on one's output, to be able to assess its merits, to consider its value in relation to the assignment topic, and to consider its accuracy and appropriacy (Nunan, 1992). Many students do not naturally possess the skills to take on such an active, critical role, and they need to be shown how to go about this. Although peer-feedback, and to a lesser extent self-assessment, are common techniques in the language classroom (Ekbatani & Pierson 2000), the challenge is to encourage students to employ these techniques outside the classroom, while actually being engaged in the academic writing process. Below I will

describe one activity that I developed for use in the self-access centre (SAC) at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. The self-access centre, much like most such centres around the world, offers students a place for self-directed learning. It consists of a physical and an online language learning environment that includes hundreds of materials for the study of all aspects of (academic) English. In addition, it offers practical workshops on such skills as giving a presentation, writing a thesis outline, and having a discussion, as well as being a one-to-one language advising service (for more information and examples, see <http://ec.hku.hk/1to1/>). Students generally use the centre on a voluntary basis and come when they have experienced difficulty with one or more aspects of their English. The centre is free to university students and work is not formally assessed. (More information about the centre can be found at www.elsac.auckland.ac.nz). The activity below was used with several hundred students over the course of a year as part of a workshop on ‘improving writing skills.’ The aim of the workshop was to encourage students to take control over the writing process and to minimise reliance on the teacher, specifically by encouraging student self-assessment. The final section of this paper makes suggestions for ways of adapting the activity for use in different contexts.

The activity

The activity introduced above aims to help tertiary level students learn how to critically examine their own and others’ written work. It consists of two parts: 1) a facilitator-led group session, and 2) a supported self-study period. In the first part, students meet as a group to discuss the purpose and different types of proofreading and revisions. Strategies for self-assessment are shared and giving and receiving peer-feedback is practised. In the second part of the activity the students work in pairs on their individual assignments (i.e. assignments given to them by their subject lecturers) throughout the semester, putting in practice what they have learned during the group session. During this period, they receive regular guidance and feedback from the facilitator. By asking students to take responsibility for their own work and by encouraging them to draw on resources other than the teacher, they are encouraged to develop skills for independent learning.

Ingredients

- ▶ (If used as a voluntary activity) an advertisement to invite students to sign up
- ▶ L2 or FL learners of similar language level (mainly intended for tertiary level students)
- ▶ Facilitator

- ▶ E-mail access for ongoing support during the second part of the activity
- ▶ A room for the initial group session (ideally 12-18 participants)
- ▶ Peer-feedback and self-assessment information and worksheets (see below)
- ▶ Student learning record to report back to the facilitator (see below)
- ▶ Information about the activity and contact details for the facilitator and other students
- ▶ Language learning resources, reference materials (e.g. dictionaries, grammar resources)

Implementation

In the initial session, students and the facilitator meet as a group for approximately one hour. The facilitator goes through several steps:

1) Giving a rationale

This includes a discussion of why proofreading and revising are an integral part of academic study and also a discussion of why self-assessment and peer-feedback are useful techniques to improve one's writing skills. Usually the facilitator starts off by asking students to list the ways they normally check their writing before handing it in and asks them to compare their techniques.

2) Types of proofreading and revisions

Next, different types of proofreading and revisions are discussed, such as checking for content, or language, or both. Many students think proofreading involves hunting for spelling and grammar errors only and an interesting discussion usually ensues.

3) Practising

We give students a sample text and ask them read it critically in pairs (see appendix 1). We look at both structure and language. We often also discuss assignment questions and their meaning. Many students receive low marks because they misunderstand the questions of their lecturers. Appendix 2 includes an example of a short list of questions and their explanations that we use as a starting point for discussion.

Individual facilitators have considerable freedom in choosing both the content for the workshops and also the amount of time they want to spend on it. Some facilitators bring in additional sample texts, others invite students to bring along an example of their own writing.

Some groups have specific needs (e.g. adult learners). We feel that this freedom is crucial in ensuring the success of the activity.

4) Pairing of students and follow-up tasks

At the end of the workshop we give students self-study materials which include a list of resources in the SAC they may find helpful (e.g. specific books and cdroms), and peer-feedback sheets with useful information and resources for collaboration (see appendix 3). Students are paired and are encouraged to help each other during the semester with understanding assignment questions and by proofreading each others' drafts. We give students a learning record (see appendix 4) that they are asked to fill in and submit to the facilitator. We take time to explain the importance of the self-study period and how improving one's writing is part of a longer-term process. Facilitators tell students that they can be contacted in the SAC or by email with questions, and will provide feedback on the students' work. They do, however, emphasise that this does not entail a proofreading service.

In the second part of the activity, the paired students meet to discuss their university assignments and implement what they have learned during the group session, using the materials they were given. Generally students meet in the SAC where they can use the available resources such as grammar resources, dictionaries, and writing manuals. The students rewrite their work based on the feedback received from each other, and their self-assessments. At any time they can submit their work to the facilitator or arrange a meeting. The facilitator will monitor which students have initiated contact and will follow up with those who didn't. Students receive feedback on a) the quality of their peer-feedback, b) the quality of their self-assessments, and c) the type and quality of their revisions (see Reinders 2007 for more information).

Reflections

Comments from the Facilitator

There were various reasons why the facilitators working in our centre were keen to offer this workshop. One of the them writes:

After doing individual consultations with students about their writing, and talking to them extensively about which resources would help them improve and how they could use those

resources, I was keen to transfer the process to a group workshop situation. One huge advantage turned out to be that when introducing resources in a group workshop situation rather than an individual consultation I was able to demonstrate the use of the resource, and get students to work with the resource in small groups, rather than merely describing and recommending it.

Another facilitator found especially the collaborative aspect of the sessions beneficial.

It was a big help to begin with some questions about the students' own processes of writing an academic essay, as this at once shifted the focus from 'ideal' (and perhaps unattainable) procedures to 'real world' study behaviour. This meant that the students were able to laugh with one another and the facilitator about issues such as procrastination and proofreading, rather than these being 'secrets' that needed to be hidden from the 'teacher', as can be the case in an individual consultation. The students gained reassurance by seeing that other students had the same weaknesses that they did, and gained inspiration from seeing competence modelled by other students.

A third facilitator found that the group dynamics allowed for a greater focus on process rather than just product:

The workshop setting enabled the students to consider the process of producing and rewriting academic prose more consciously. In an individual consultation, the student sometimes has a strong agenda to persuade the 'teacher' to 'fix' the writing for the student, which the consultant has to actively strategise against to ensure that the focus remains on self-access activities and motivating the student to reflect on their learning procedures. In the workshop setting, this temptation is removed, as no student expects to have exclusive attention from the facilitator so that their writing can be corrected. This frees them up to reflect on their own processes and how they could be improved, particularly by accessing the resources introduced and also by improving their time management skills. This consequence of the workshop environment is thus a valuable tool for promoting self-reflection on learning, rather than looking to a 'teacher' for a solution.

The real gains came in the second part of the workshop; the self-study period. The first facilitator felt that:

Rather than the activity being a one-off meeting where it is difficult to gauge how much students have actually learned, the ongoing contact was great. It was possible to get to know the students, and to advise them in relation to their specific needs and in the context of their actual work. The support they got from each other was brilliant – some of them really helped each other through the semester.

Comments from Participants

One student found the ongoing support from the facilitator motivating, which in turn made her come to the SAC to study more often:

First I thought we must have more class to learn to write better and learn to find your own mistakes. But during the semester I could always email the teacher. She didn't tell me exactly my mistakes but gave me good advice and kept pushing me to keep trying. She was really great. It made me come to [the centre] more often and use the books and cdroms to check my work. I now see many more mistakes and also know more about paying attention to the order and the purpose of what I want to say.

Another student found especially the peer-support helpful:

I met several times with my Study Buddy [the student they were paired with] and together we worked on our assignments. It was good to do it this way and he had found many mistakes. Some time it is good to ask someone to read who does not study the same topic. We promised to send each other one revision per week until we got it right. We both had good grades.

Reasons for the Group's Success

In a self access centre it is always challenging to motivate students especially where students use the centre on a voluntary basis. This is certainly true in a university in a second language environment like in New Zealand where students have great difficulty coping with the workload, the language, adjusting to the new country, etc. English study is often seen as extra work and quickly falls off the long list of things to do. With this workshop:

- ▶ We tried to make the topic as relevant as possible. Rather than offering a general workshop on writing, a focus on skills that are closely linked with the students' needs helped us attract more students and keep them 'on board' also throughout the second part of the workshop.
- ▶ As the workshop allowed the students to work on their own assignments, students felt they were able to make time for it. It was not an extra demand on their time but closely linked to their course requirements.
- ▶ Related to this, participation in the activity is flexible (apart from the first workshop); it is up to the students when they want to meet or when they want to contact the facilitator, making it easier for them to find an opportunity to do so.
- ▶ Students obtained a lot of support from each other, especially from their study partners. They reported feeling more motivated and learning a lot, both from the suggestions they received and those they gave.
- ▶ The workshop integrates a focus on English language into the students' regular work. Language becomes not a separate 'problem' but a part of their study, and hopefully their lives.
- ▶ The feedback and guidance from the facilitator throughout the semester were invaluable to many students. Rather than expecting students to maintain their levels of self-motivation and be able to implement all the suggestions made during the workshop, the support network created for the students succeeded in helping students continue to work on their writing. By prioritising the process over the product and by providing extensive support throughout the semester, independent learning skills were developed.

Suggestions for Adaptations

- ▶ This activity was originally designed as a voluntarily workshop for which students sign up individually in our self-access centre. It could equally well be used for specific groups or as a required activity. For the initial group session we do not assign students to different groups on the basis of their study backgrounds, their language level, or whether they are undergraduate or postgraduate students. However, if in your institution students have widely differing backgrounds, separate groups may need to be formed. For the second part of the activity we try to pair students with similar interests, engaged in similar

types of writing (e.g. first-year students with relatively short assignments, or students busy writing a thesis)

- ▣ We have offered this activity for individual departments where students have very specific writing needs (e.g. medical students who have to write laboratory reports). We were keen not to revert to traditional teaching in these cases. By asking students to bring in and work on their own assignments and draw on resources available in the self-access centre and around the university we succeeded in linking the activity with the students' own (course-related) goals.
- ▣ This activity focuses on writing but a similar programme can be designed for speaking skills. In our SAC we use a similar format, i.e. a group session and then paired work over a period of several weeks where we provide a video camera and resources, and the facilitator gives feedback on the recordings.

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Appendix 1 – sample text

The worksheet below is one example of information given out during the workshop and serves to introduce and practise some proofreading techniques.

A. The content of writing: introduction

Please read the introduction below and try to give detailed feedback on it.

The Minister of Police recently stated that giving police weapons is necessary because the only way to meet violence is with violence. In a recent debate on a television about the role of the police in the handling of unruly crowds from rock concerts it was suggested that police should be armed with tear gas and water cannons. However, is arming the police really the right way to go about solving law and order problems? There are more sensible ways of dealing with law and order at these events and government agencies such as the police should be aware of them. This essay examines the range of response that police currently have open to them as well as several alternatives giving police weapons.

	Yes	No (give the reason!)
Is there any background or general information about the topic?		
Does the introduction progress from general to specific?		
Are the two sides of the argument presented in the introduction?		
Does the introduction clearly state the topic?		
Does it make clear the importance of the topic?		

B. The language of the writing: linked sentences, grammar and vocabulary

The following text contains inappropriately linked sentences, as well as vocabulary and grammatical errors. The underlined words in the first sentence are examples of such errors. Try to find and correct them.

Where most learning take place outside the classroom, classroom learning is extremely important.

(Whereas) (takes)

One of the most important things of an ideal class is the people, e.g. the teacher and the students. A good English class should be included both a qualified teacher with good teaching methods as well as highly motivated students. In contrast, a good teacher should have a well-designed teaching plan. Also, the teacher should have learning objectives that is made clear to the students.

Students have responsibilities too in order to creating a effective English class. Firstly, they should regularly attend classes. Secondly, they should complete all homeworks and assignments on time.

The materials such as handouts and internet resources can be very helpful. These materials can provide students with extra information without them spend a lot of time searching for it. For example, providing videos, computers and appropriate software can also increase the student's interest in leaning since many materials are moving from print into electronic form.

An ideal English class should include positive attitudes towards learn from both the teacher and the students. In order to achieve the best learning goals, students should perform the best they can, both in the class and outside class. Teachers should endeavour to create best environment possible and to locate effective resources.

Appendix 2 – assignment questions

This is an example of a short list of assignment questions and their meanings. The facilitator asks the students to match the verbs with their definitions and then discusses the answers.

A	B
1. Describe	a. Place in a division or class in a complete system or grouping.
2. Define	b. Conclude, reach an opinion from facts or reasoning.
3. Compare	c. Make a judgement about the value/importance/worth of something.
4. Contrast	d. Give a detailed account.
5. Express your opinion...	e. Give the precise meaning of something. Show how the distinctions you make are necessary.
6. Analyse	f. Look for the similarities and differences.

7. Discuss	g. Emphasis the differences between two or more things.
8. Categorise	h. Make known, show by words.
9. Infer	i. Make a detailed examination or investigation into something.
10. Evaluate	j. Combine separate ideas, beliefs, styles etc.
11. Synthesise	k. Investigate or examine by argument; give reasons for and against.

Appendix 3 – student information sheet (peer-feedback grid)

This is a short excerpt of the information sheet we give to students. If you are interested in seeing some of the other materials, please email the author: hayo@hayo.nl.

Assessing someone's writing

You can use the grid below to assess your partner's writing. Put a cross in the box you think best describes his/her text. When you are finished, discuss your answers. You can ask your partner to do the same for you.

For a change you could assess your own writing and then compare your notes with your partner's notes. Did you agree?

Some Points to look at	Needs a lot of work	Needs some work	Does not need work	Comments
<i>Content</i>				
Organisation				
Introduction				
Coherence and ideas				
Conclusion				
Relevance				
<i>Language</i>				
Grammar				
Vocabulary				

Linked sentences and paragraphs				
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Appendix 4 –student learning record

We copy this learning record several times onto a double-sided sheet of paper and give it to the students. We also email them a copy if they prefer to keep their record electronically. Students send the record to the facilitator along with their draft and comments (if any) from their study partner or from their self-assessment.

Title	Date and draft version
Self-assessment: what aspects did you find you needed to improve?	
-	
-	
-	
Peer-feedback: what points needed a bit or a lot of work? (Use the peer-feedback table on your handout).	
-	
-	
-	
Teacher feedback: Did you show your draft to the teacher? What points for improvement did (s)he find?	
-	
-	
-	
Revising your work: what materials did you find helpful to revise your work?	
-	
-	
-	
-	

About the Author

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