

Theoretical Rationale
Organizational Strategies for First Year Composition Writers
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Topic and Target Skills

Within the context of cross-cultural composition courses, it's important to embrace not only the thoughts, practices, and customs, but also the diverse writing styles students from various writing backgrounds bring to the classroom. However, one difficulty in accomplishing this task is just that: diverse and sometimes unfamiliar writing styles. Culture is an inherent part of the rhetorical situation, as it is reflected in two of the three elements: audience and context. Not only will international students be introduced to an American style of writing, so too will American students be introduced to various styles of international students.

In an issue devoted to ESL writers, "The Writing Lab Newsletter" produced by the Department of English at Purdue University identifies and offers suggestions for helping international students deal with cultural variations in the context of composition classrooms. Two of these "cultural variants" are the focus of this unit: deductive and quasi-inductive topic development and degree of explicit transition signaling.

The newsletter discusses the difference in deductive versus inductive preferences in America, and states how this may be a problem for international students who come from a culture that values inductive organization strategies that allow readers to draw conclusions from the evidence presented by the author (3). Another cultural variant is that American audiences and writers tend to favor the explicit signaling of transitions and forging links across units of discourse (4). As two related problem areas, type of organization and text cohesion are the focus of the unit.

However, the purpose of the unit is not only to increase the use of cohesive devices. In the last decade many quantitative studies have hypothesized that learners of English actually overuse and misuse cohesive devices at a high rate. Therefore, this unit focuses on the evaluation phrase of having students reflect on the devices used by other writers and themselves and evaluate the appropriateness and effect of the cohesive devices.

The Importance of Genuine Texts

The growing popularity of corpus linguistics has increased the interest in using authentic and genuine texts and tasks. The quantitative and qualitative methods of analyzing texts through corpus linguistics has increased the availability to such authentic tasks, and has led to much research that allows researchers and teachers to make generalizations about language use. In addition, as Conrad (2000) points out that “these patterns in frequency are interpreted relative to the purposes and situational characteristics of the registers” (550).

The present teaching unit does not focus on those cohesive devices most prevalent in academic writing. The rationale for this is that, at an early stage in an introductory course in composition, students will benefit most by identifying and mastering the general concepts of all types of, for example, linking adverbials. Later in the semester, the focus can move into more corpus-based quantitative analysis that helps students understand which devices are most common and effective in the academic discourse domain.

The unit heavily employs genuine texts and examples for students to work with. For example, all questions in the activities for the cohesive devices unit come from the Longman Grammar of Written English. Again, as this unit occurs early in the semester of an introductory course, the examples come from various registers, not exclusively academic. More samples from academic texts would be employed at a later stage of instruction.

In addition to the examples, the unit encompasses a few of the principles of corpus linguistics by asking students to locate and analyze genuine texts they encounter in their daily lives. Students perform a type of non-electronic concordancing activities to examine the occurrences of specific lexical items within the larger unit of discourse.

A second focus on the authenticity of the language tasks comes into play when students are asked to revise and evaluate their own writing for the use of cohesive devices and organizational strategies. Academic writers must perform these tasks constantly and almost intuitively. However, for inexperienced writers, these types of activities must be practiced explicitly in order for them to become intuitive.

References

Conrad, Susan. “Will Corpus Linguistics Revolutionize Grammar Teaching in the 21st Century.” *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(3), 2000, 548-560.

"The Writing Lab Newsletter," vol. 24, no. 7. Department of English, Purdue University: West Lafayette, 2000.