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A Two-phase University Academic Writing Programme for Lower Level Japanese Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Teachers of lower-intermediate students, or students who are perceived as having low motivation for writing, often struggle to know "where to begin" a writing program. The "Two-Phase" programme and the results of its implementation exhibit that with step-by-step and clear instruction, lower level writers can indeed master the fundamentals of academic writing that they will need in order to proceed to higher level writing tasks. The authors address problems faced by teachers of students with limited experience in academic writing by offering concrete ideas which are based on current thought about language acquisition and writing instruction. The case study and multiple appendix approach offer materials that instructors can readily adapt to their own writing classrooms.

Introduction

The Two-phase Academic Writing Programme outlined below, resulted from a compilation of ideas developed and used during the normal course of learning and teaching in two "English Two" (E2) classes in the second semester of 2009 at MIC (Miyazaki International College), a private Liberal Arts college located in Kyushu, Japan.

MIC offers a four-year university degree programme in 'Comparative Culture.' All content (subject discipline) courses at MIC, across the curriculum (apart from Japanese Language and Expression classes), are taught in English. Added to this, twice-weekly English Language classes (1.5 hours each) are mandatory for all students in their first three semesters at the college.

By the time students reach their final year at MIC, they are expected to demonstrate an ability to apply the conventions of academic writing in all their formal written work. This includes short written assignments of varying genres, in the full range of curriculum areas pertinent to each student, as well as longer academic essays and eventually, in the fourth year, an extended senior thesis developed around a self-selected research topic, which is published and stored in the institution's library for future reference.

In reality, many third and fourth year students still have serious difficulties producing academic writing of an acceptable standard, and for many there is an apparent lack of awareness of important but basic conventions of academic writing.[1] MIC students and their teachers alike often express frustration at the demands of higher level writing tasks and the quality of written work that is produced.

Typical complaints by teachers about the quality of writing produced by MIC students (at all levels) have included the following.[2]

There is…

[1] One impact of this has been the recent decision to revisit the senior thesis requirements and to implement a 'Writing Across the Curriculum' programme at senior levels.

[2] Comments here are drawn from informal conversations over a two-year period with colleagues at MIC who teach in a wide range of disciplines.

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- A high level of grammatical inaccuracy that frequently interferes with communicative quality (i.e. Much of what many students write is incoherent and often unintelligible.)
- An over-reliance on low level, general high-frequency lexis, with little attempt to use academic vocabulary, and / or inappropriate use of academic vocabulary (i.e. in form and / or meaning).
- A lack of depth, poor organization and / or connection of ideas and weak control over conventional patterns of academic discourse in writing 'products'[3]
- Poor referencing (if this exists at all)
- Frequent plagiarism
- A lack of a mature 'voice'
- Problems with aspects of style and appropriate register
- Evidence of first language interference (e.g. sentence 'listing,' literal translation of Japanese expressions, and use of Japanese punctuation conventions)
- Overuse of previously taught formulaic phrases (such as "That is to say," and "… and so on.")
- 'Regurgitation' of class content with little evidence of independent research, problem-solving, synthesis of information and / or critical analysis

Other comments included references to an apparent belief that many students seem content to hand in sloppy work, hoping that it will be good enough to get a pass grade. This (it is claimed) may be because some students don't take any pride in what they produce, or it may be that the demands of other work see some students trying to 'cut corners' in order to meet course deadlines in all of their subjects. In the latter case, some teachers appear resigned to the fact that at times they have had no choice but to accept work they would normally consider sub-standard, since it was better than receiving no work at all.

On the other hand, some teachers appear to think that strong academic writing of any kind is simply beyond MIC students, especially at lower levels. (Statements that underscore this include, "These students are of such a low level, they simply CAN'T produce academic writing of a standard that is acceptable. I guess I just have to take what they give me." Or, " These students can't even manage to write an accurate sentence. We need to focus our energies on getting them to write accurate sentences," (with the implication, perhaps, that asking lower level students to create longer texts is a waste of time). [4]

Similarly, students' complaints about writing often indicate frustration. Statements along these lines are common…

- "I just don't know what to do (or where to start)."
- "It's too difficult, I can't do it."
- "My grammar is bad, but I don't know how to make it better."
- "I don't know enough vocabulary, so it's hard to say what I want to say."
- "I hate writing, even in Japanese, so I don't want to do it in English."
- "There's too much information and I don't know what is important and what is not. How do I choose?"

[3] 'Products' in this case refers to any finished piece of written work required by a teacher that is to be used as a demonstration of a student's writing abilities, critical thinking skills and / or understanding of class content, for assessment purposes.

[4] Authors' interpretation.

- "Why do I have to do this?" (Perhaps the relevance of the writing task is unclear, or the task seems 'trivial.')
- "Why do I have to do it THIS way?" (Perhaps indicating a lack of awareness of the underlying learning goals, or a sense of frustration with task boundaries.)
- "I have no ideas. Where can I get ideas from?" Or, "Why can't I just use the ideas of other people (experts), since they know more than I do?"
- "I have ideas but I don't know how to express them in English."
- "I have ideas, but I don't know how to organise them."
- "I did my best, but my teacher still isn't happy and I don't know why."

The teacher/student issues raised above can be broadly categorized thus; teacher expectations, student motivation (including issues relating to task relevance), problems with control over grammatical and lexical forms, problems with text organization and academic writing conventions, and overall task management problems (from planning to completion).

The two E2 teachers who developed the Two-phase Academic Writing Programme below, were, in their respective classes, trying independently to address these kinds of issues, aware that teaching faculty in all disciplines are very conscious of the need to devise new ways to improve the writing skills of MIC students at all instructional levels.

As a preface to the description of the Two-phase Academic Writing Programme, it is worth considering these issues briefly, since the values underpinning these formed, in no small part, a rationale for the way the programme developed.

Teacher Expectations

Aware of the possible impact of a 'Pygmalion Effect,'[5] the two E2 teachers were determined to set up writing tasks in such a way as to indicate that they believed their students were indeed capable of achieving the challenging task of writing a strong academic essay. In fact, in the case of Class Two, the independent writing project was a conscious experiment to test the belief that MIC students at low levels were incapable of writing a well-organised, appropriately referenced, multi-paragraph academic essay. From the outset, the Class Two teacher believed, given adequate time, appropriate instruction, sympathetic and practical support, clear expectations and suitable models, that her first-year students were in fact able to complete such an essay. This belief was clearly communicated to her students in the introduction to the writing project and many times throughout.

Student Motivation

Student motivation was heightened in Class One through the selection of topics relevant to the age and interests of the students, and via the collaborative nature of the tasks. In Class Two, students were motivated by being given the freedom to select any topic they liked, provided it was related to work in another MIC class *that was of interest and importance to them*. They were specifically asked to write only about something they *wanted* to write about. Many expressed initial disbelief at the freedom being given them and sought reassurance that this was

[5] Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. 1968. *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

indeed what the teacher was asking them to do. They seemed excited to have the opportunity to write freely about something that mattered to them personally.

At all stages, the teachers also took pains to relate the writing skills and strategies used in the E2 class to writing tasks in other MIC classes. Students understood the relevance of the tasks because they were explicitly shown how they might transfer their new insights to other (non E2) MIC written work.

Two other factors were important. Firstly, the students knew they would have a peer audience for their work and secondly, their teachers were also concerned to draw students' attention to the requirements of the kind of writing they would eventually be expected to complete in their final year at MIC – the Senior Thesis. In both instances, when they understood the 'real' nature of the writing task, this became a motivation for students to apply themselves.

The fact that students were repeatedly told that their teacher believed they could complete the task and complete it well, was a source of motivation. Class Two students in particular were frequently praised for their efforts, no matter how small, and the teacher made a point of commenting thoughtfully and often about each student's work in an effort to show the student's ideas and writing attempts, no matter how maturely (or not) these were expressed, were taken seriously.

Problems with Control over Grammatical and Lexical Forms

While Ellis admits to the usefulness of explicit grammar instruction in certain contexts,[6] his recent research indicates that the greatest value of such instruction is not in the actual progress it is able to evoke in learners' language (in particular, in improved accuracy), but in the fact that such instruction draws the learner's attention to form (through the act of 'noticing') and by doing so, sets the learner up for acquisition at a later stage. In other words, while a learner may produce 'accurate' language when *consciously* attempting to use a form that has been explicitly taught, (for example answering a grammar question correctly in a test), it is usually not until a much later stage, (when the learner is developmentally ready), that he/she is able to activate this 'knowledge' automatically, without conscious effort. In the meantime, she/he will continue to make the same grammatical errors, even though aware of correct form when errors are pointed out. [7]

Indeed, it is now known that grammatical accuracy is linked to an individual's progress through fixed second-language developmental stages. Accuracy (and fluency) cannot, therefore, be 'manufactured' through a pedagogical approach that focuses purely on the teaching of grammatical 'rules'. The cumulative findings of several well-known longitudinal SLA studies, such as those by Pienemann, indicate that it is impossible for students to leap these developmental stages through focused, decontextualised grammatical instruction for which they are not developmentally ready. [8] In fact, decontextualised grammar instruction, and/or

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[6] Ellis, R. (2002). The Place of Grammar Instruction in the Second/Foreign Language Curriculum. In Fotos, S. and Hinkel, E. (Eds.), *New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching in Second Language Classrooms* (pp. 17-34). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

[7] Ellis, R. (2002). Does form-focused instruction affect the acquisition of implicit knowledge? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. 24(2), 223-236.
Doughty, C., & Williams, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[8] Pienemann, M. Is Language Teachable? Psycholinguistic Experiments and Hypotheses. *Applied Linguistics* 1989 10(1):52-79. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

focusing on grammatical accuracy *while in the act of writing* is counterproductive to development.[9]

With these factors in mind, it is, therefore, more productive to deal with issues of grammatical accuracy on a case-by-case basis, with individual students, in the context of the message they want to convey, *after* they have already made an attempt to communicate that message in written form.

While this approach may be more time-consuming for the teacher, since it requires a greater level of individualised instruction, it is preferable to a 'one-size-fits all' approach to grammatical instruction which, though easier for a teacher to plan and administer, leaves students who have already acquired the structures being taught, bored on the sidelines, while those who are not developmentally ready for it remain confused and frustrated. In neither case is *real* learning taking place.

The Two-phase Academic Writing Programme outlined below offers teachers and students an approach to the teaching and learning of grammar that better fits what is known of the language acquisition process and better meets individual learning needs. It does, however, require a commitment on the part of the teacher to less formulaic pedagogy and an abandonment of over-reliance on 'recipe' grammar resources. The extra effort involved may be offset, however, by the satisfaction that comes from knowing one is delivering more relevant instruction, with a corresponding noticeable improvement in both student motivation and grammatical accuracy at the precise points where this is needed, and where the student is developmentally capable of making genuine change.

Likewise, in relation to the development of vocabulary knowledge, obviously each learner has an individual repertoire. The individualised approach of the Class Two writing project in particular, enabled the teacher to introduce high frequency (academic and general) vocabulary that was directly relevant to each learner and avoided wasting time on items already known. The Class One programme, by taking a topical and collaborative approach, provided a bank of words elicited from the learners themselves, which individuals could draw on at will. This allowed even weaker learners to demonstrate their prior knowledge, since everyone knew different words, while providing opportunities for the acquisition of (genuinely) new words by all, regardless of language proficiency level. Giving weaker students this opportunity to provide peer support also helps to develop their confidence, thus building their willingness to contribute ideas in English.

In both classes, while using a lot of new vocabulary in their writing, learners knew which new words they should actually make an effort to learn, (i.e. words which are also found on the general and academic high frequency word lists, which students had copies of, these words being recognized as of higher priority than other words). Though useful in the context of a specific piece of writing, other words that are known to be of low frequency do not need to be the focus of instruction, since

[9] Kasper, L.F. (1997) Assessing the Metacognitive Growth of ESL Student Writers. *TESL-EJ*, 3 (1), A-1. Retrieved January 22nd, 2010 from: http://www.cc.kyoto-su.ac.jp/information/tesl-ej/ej09/a1.html
Kasper found that focusing on grammatical aspects of writing had a negative impact on writing quality, while making communicative aspects of writing the priority led to better quality writing overall. Likewise, Kubota's work indicates that L2 writing suffers when teachers focus on sentence level accuracy. See Kubota, R. (1998). An investigation of L1-L2 transfer in writing among Japanese university students: Implications for contrastive rhetoric. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 7(1), 69–100.

they are unlikely to be encountered often.[10] Subject-discipline specific words (specialized vocabulary) varied from essay topic to topic and students were free to choose which of these they wished to attempt to retain.

Text Organization and Academic Writing Conventions

Problems with text organization and academic writing conventions were addressed by means of careful and appropriate modeling. Students were given examples of essays, paragraphs and sentences to read and analyse, and time and opportunity to practise creating their own. The use of detailed corrective feedback created a further opportunity to provide models of appropriate language use. [11] Modeling writing, especially with low-level learners, is increasingly seen as an effective method in the development of stronger writing skills. [12] For low-level learners at MIC, providing understandable models of alternative language forms and patterns, which they could then attempt to manipulate, was seen as a more efficient step to writing progress than simply highlighting the fact that an error had been made and expecting the student to work out the correction for themselves. [13]

Task Management Problems

Often, when given an essay topic and a task outline and asked to 'get on with it,' students are at a loss as to how and where to start. This is especially the case for low-level learners who may have little or no prior experience in writing academic texts. Indeed, a native English speaker at the early stages of tertiary study may also find this kind of task extremely difficult.

While a 'sink or swim' approach to writing, in which students are expected to complete a whole (and difficult) task with little preparation, and little understanding of the steps involved, and are then (possibly) berated for their lack of skill, or their inevitable inability to produce exactly what the teacher required, may reap benefits for some more resilient learners, the reality is that most students will experience a great deal of unnecessary stress if taught in this way. If (as Krashen suggests) negative affective factors have a detrimental effect on learning[14], then this approach should be avoided at all costs.

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[10] Nation, I.S.P. (2001) *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paul Nation's research into vocabulary acquisition indicates that high frequency words are so important, *anything* a teacher can do to ensure these are learnt is worthwhile, though it is better if these words are encountered in the context of a meaningful communicative task. For this reason, the methodology of vocabulary instruction was of less concern in the E2 writing programme, than the fact that at all times students were encouraged to learn high frequency lexical items and that they had a means (high frequency general and academic vocabulary lists) whereby to identify which words are high frequency words and which are not.

[11] The value of corrective feedback (in its various forms) is still debated. See: Bitchener, J., S. Young and D. Cameron. (2005) The effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing.* Volume 14, Issue 3, September 2005, Pages 191-205

[12] Master, P. (1997) Using models in EST. , 35(4). *English Teaching Forum*. Retrieved January 22nd, 2010 from: http://eca.state.gov/forum/vols/vol35/no4/p30.htm

[13] Of course, as mentioned earlier, retention of the forms modeled is related to developmental readiness, so the models served only to encourage 'noticing' in the cases where a student was not developmentally ready to acquire the structure he/she was having problems with.

[14] Krashen, S. (1987) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Prentice-Hall International.

By breaking the essay writing task into clear sub-stages, and taking a slow, methodical approach, even students who hate to write begin to experience success, and may undergo a change of attitude to writing not only in English, but also in their own language.[15]

Having an open-ended timeframe for completion may be a luxury that most teachers cannot afford, but setting specific, smaller goals and shorter, manageable deadlines, and expecting students to complete parts of a whole, rather than an entire piece of work at once, with one 'now or never' deadline, is more conducive to learning, and more likely to result in task completion by all learners. Such a staged approach is actually manageable in most cases, provided the semester's work schedule is planned well.

Emergence of the Two-Phase Academic Writing Programme

Apart from occasional 'remedial' writing tutoring of individual learners at upper levels, and some limited input into senior thesis papers at the (late) editing stage, the focus of the teaching of the authors (at MIC) had been on delivering first and second year English language and content classes. Therefore, the programme described here reflects attempts to deal with writing issues *at this early stage* of the learners' tertiary experience.

To begin, the background to the Two-phase Academic Writing Programme is explained, and then an outline of the programme is given. The appendices found at the end of this document contain student comments and some lesson materials, all of which, it is hoped, will encourage teachers of lower-level English language students to a greater confidence in their students' abilities to create well-crafted academic written texts, and motivate teachers to use and/or adapt the academic writing programme to their respective classes.

While the programme suggested here is specifically designed to be incorporated into the MIC E2 context, as a 'stand-alone' programme it could also be useful, with some adaptation, in other teaching situations.

Background: Writing Tuition in First Year English Language Classes at MIC

'English Two' is the course label appended to the second-semester English skills enhancement class required of all first-year Japanese university students at MIC. As the name would suggest, this course is preceded by an 'English One' (E1) English Language class.

In the E1 class, which is offered in the first semester each year, first-year students are introduced to "initial basic proficiency in fluency and accuracy in …written English," and to "writing skills from the paragraph level." They are encouraged to develop a "basic level of accuracy in… written sentence construction" along with a basic knowledge of "vocabulary for academic purposes."[16]

The E2 classes are expected to build on the foundation established in the E1 classes. The MIC Handbook elaborates this aim thus… "English 2 continues

[15] In fact, improvement in writing skills in English (as an L2), may well have positive effects on the quality of L1 writing, as recent work by Kobayashia, and Rinnert indicates multidirectionality of writing skills' application (ie. writing skills acquired in L2 can be transferred back to writing in L1, not just in forward transfer from L1 to L2).

[16] 2009 Bulletin and Handbook of Student Information: Miyazaki International College. P. 88.

proficiency development in … written English…strengthens written proficiency through practice in organized multi-paragraph essays…(and) … further develops structural accuracy and fluency using more complex forms."[17]

Writing instruction in first year English Language classes is, therefore, expected to provide both input and practice opportunities that will create a sound foundation on which students can build, and which will enable them to cope successfully with the demands of academic writing in their wider college experience.

Background: The Emergence of the Two-Phase Academic Writing Programme

In the second semester of 2009, while planning and teaching independently, and lacking a detailed formal course outline, two relatively new (to MIC) E2 teachers sought to implement their own interpretation of the course description as elaborated in the MIC Handbook, in their second semester, English Two classes.

Students in one class, (Class One), were asked to write a multi-paragraph 'opinion' essay on a 'controversial' topic. Students in the other class (Class Two) were also expected to prepare a multi-paragraph essay, but their writing was expected to demonstrate summarizing and description skills.[18] In each class, one period per week, over approximately five weeks, was designated for this. In the case of Class Two, the computer suites were booked for most of these lessons.

The quality of writing eventually produced in both classes was extremely encouraging and, when compared with pieces of writing completed by those same students for other (non-English Language) classes in semester two, 2009 at MIC, (taught by these same E2 teachers), the writing completed in the E2 classes, while not without its problems, was in most cases noticeably superior in terms of grammatical accuracy, quality of content, appropriate use of vocabulary, organization, word count and application of writing conventions (in particular attribution of ideas and use of appropriate referencing conventions).

Overall the standard of writing and presentation was much higher than either teacher had anticipated and the students themselves evidenced a great deal of pride in their unexpectedly strong quality of work. Even the lowest proficiency learners managed to produce work of a very pleasing standard. Most students later commented that they believed they had made significant strides in their English academic writing skills. [19]

In order to capture some practical benefit from insights obtained through this very positive experience, which may lead to an improvement the quality of writing teaching and learning in the E2 classes generally, it was decided, after the semester was over, to combine the most useful elements of each teacher's approach into one teaching and learning 'package,' and to make this information available in the form of the Two-phase Academic Writing Programme outlined below.

The work completed in Class One was seen to be preparatory to the more independent work in the Class Two programme. During the preparatory phase, as well as receiving active teacher input, students strongly supported and scaffolded

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[17] Ibid.

[18] In the latter case, the accuracy of content, though normally important, was NOT the prime consideration, since the focus of the task was to develop the quality of the language, an awareness of essay structure and basic academic conventions, though of course the teacher concerned drew students' attention to any glaring errors and illogical or contradictory statements.

[19] See Appendix One

each other, while learning the basic mechanics of writing an academic essay. This preparatory phase has been entitled Phase One.

The work undertaken in Class Two incorporated many of the same features, but students worked more independently. The requirement to do unassisted research, the opportunity to plan and write about a personally selected topic, along with more stringent presentation and referencing requirements, was seen as a natural progression to the work completed in Class One.[20] This more 'independent' phase is entitled Phase Two.

In compiling the two programmes into one, it is hoped, that the resulting Two-phase programme will…

- Be a useful resource to other interested teachers of low-level writers (thereby avoiding the necessity of completely 'reinventing the wheel,' in planning terms, each semester)
- Enable low-level English language learners, who are struggling to cope with the demands of academic writing generally, to experience greater writing success at the beginning stages of their academic writing experience
- Provide a means (through a more systematic and 'staged' approach to academic writing instruction at the early levels) to promote improvement in the quality of written academic texts produced by students in the senior years of academic study.
- Be a vehicle through which teachers, student advisors (and perhaps other student support personnel) may track development in academic writing skills on the part of individual learners in order to enable earlier intervention where students are seen to be having serious writing difficulties. [21]

The Two-phase Academic Writing Programme

Phase One: Introduction to Basic Academic (5 paragraph) Essay Writing - an Opinion Essay

Stages

1. Teaching students planning strategies
2. Reading sample essays to raise awareness
3. Divide and conquer—students collaboratively create essays
4. Rewriting—peer editing and rubrics
5. Limited research essay

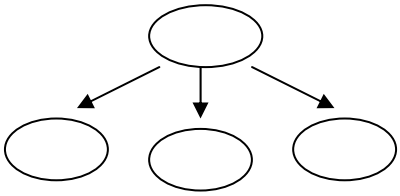
[20] In fact in the original Class One programme, a sixth stage requiring an independent essay (on a topic set by the teacher) was originally included, but since this duplicated many aspects of the Class Two individual essay, the two independent essays were merged in the final Two-phase programme outlined here.

[21] One suggestion would be the introduction of an ongoing writing portfolio for each student that would collect samples of written work from classes taken in each year. The advantage of such a body of work, (which could be stored by each student's advisor), would be to highlight, early in a student's career, those who are having significant problems achieving writing success at an acceptable pace. This would enable more speedy intervention in the form of ongoing remedial work (e.g. extra 1:1 tuition in the ARC – Academic Resource Centre (an independent learning centre) to begin much sooner and thus circumvent the present need for last minute 'rescue attempts' in a student's fourth year.

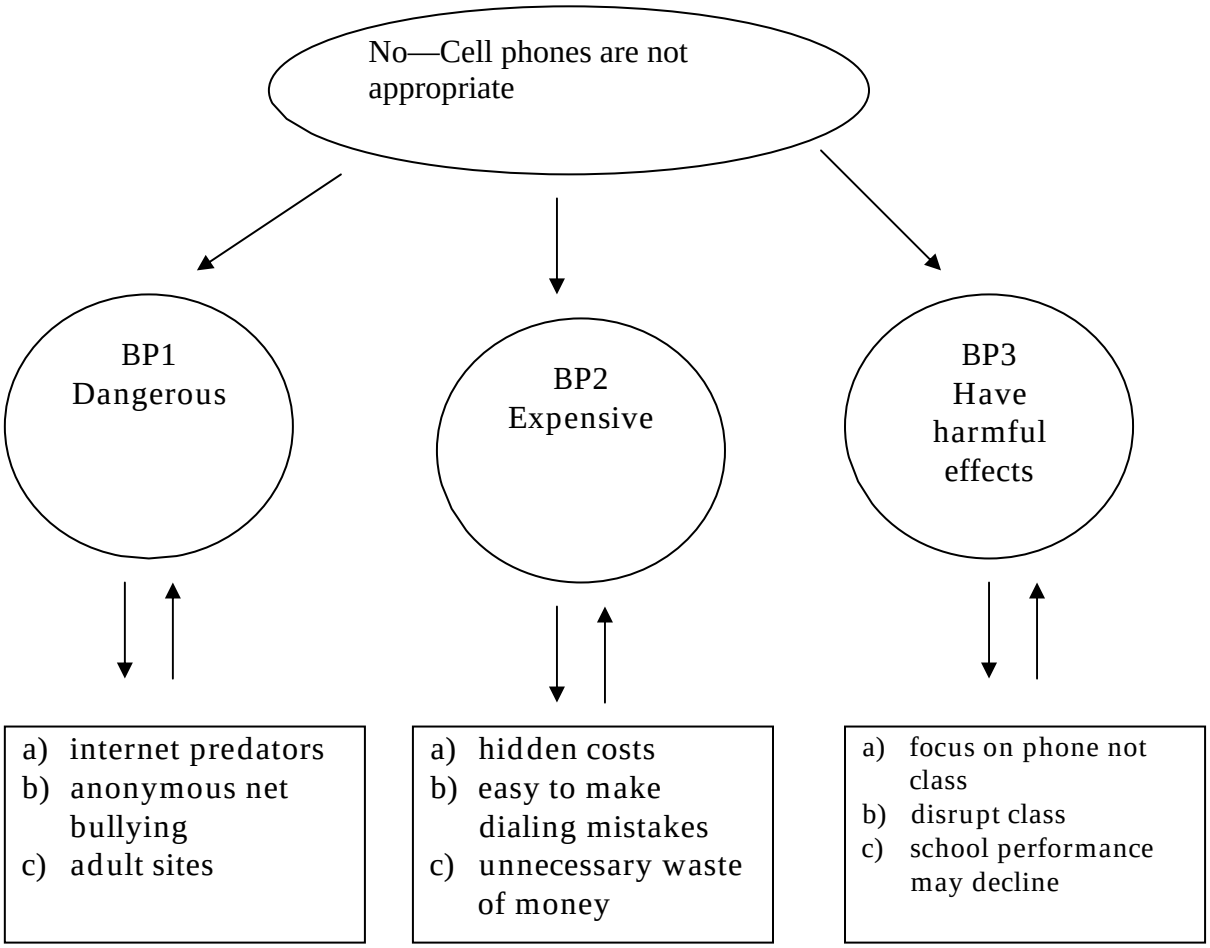
Stage One: Teaching Students Planning Strategies

Students often want to 'dive into the deep end' (begin their essays immediately) although they do not really know how to 'swim' (write). It is vital to help them understand that good writing begins with thinking and planning. One way to facilitate this process is to begin with a graphic organiser. Any type of mind map might do. However, the organiser given below has been particularly effective, as it visually represents the body of the essay, in helping students grasp the concept of "one paragraph / one main idea."

The topmost circle is the essay question slot. In this slot students usually write a word or symbol that indicates their stance on the 'opinion essay' topic. In each of the three lower circles, the students write a key idea that explains why they believe in the stance they have taken.



In the second part of the planning stage "support and reasons" boxes are added to the organiser. (See the example below, created in response to the question: Are cell phones appropriate for younger students?)



The lower three circles and boxes represent the three body paragraphs (BP) of a traditional five paragraph essay. The arrows help the students to visualize the concept that the supporting ideas and reasons in the box below the key idea must be logically related and offer concrete support for *that particular* key idea.

During the first stage of teaching how to plan, students engage in a 'quick plan' activity with a number of essay topics. In other words they have at least two topics to plan per class and a time limit for the creating of the graphic organiser

activity. Additionally, topics are recycled during speaking activities in order to help students share ideas, gain exposure to a variety of viewpoints, recycle vocabulary and to allow opportunities for automatising of language. During the initial 'idea gathering' (creating the graphic organiser), students do not need to write full sentences. Using only key points allows them to focus on generating ideas, rather than worrying about grammar or spelling, which can be dealt with later. The use of only key ideas will also allow students to work on fluency (rather than reading) during associated speaking exercises that make use of pre-created organisers.

Stage Two: Reading Sample Essays to Raise Awareness

As mentioned earlier, current research in ESL writing points to the efficacy of allowing students to learn to write by using models. In E2, the students found it helpful to read essays similar to the types of essay that they would be expected to write. In order to raise student awareness regarding traditional essay features, a series of exercises accompanied the readings. The following is a list of activities that were used…

- Read a sample essay and 'reverse-engineer' (or work backwards) to fill in a graphic organiser based on the key ideas and support for these, as found in the sample essay
- Read and circle, correct or add paragraph elements such as transitional phrases, synonyms, conjunctions and punctuation
- Read and put the paragraphs in order

Stage Three: Divide and Conquer—Students Collaboratively Create Essay Paragraphs, Introductions and Conclusions

By this stage of the essay writing process, students now have a clearer idea of what an essay is and are thus more prepared to write at least a well-supported paragraph.

At this point, students are given an essay topic. It is helpful if the topic is relevant to their age, interests and experience. They should then begin to plan with the use of a graphic organiser. Students share their ideas and create one organiser for the whole class on the whiteboard.

Following this, in pairs, students collaboratively write one body paragraph. For example, in a class of 18 students, the writing of the first body paragraph (BP1) is assigned to three pairs of students. Similarly, responsibility for the second (BP2) and third body (BP3) paragraphs is given to three pairs of students respectively. Thus, if using the example from the 'cell phone' topic above, three pairs of students would be expected to write about the dangers posed by cell phones to younger students, three pairs of students would write a paragraph about the expensive nature of cell phones for younger students and the final three pairs of students would write a paragraph explaining the harmful effects of cell phones on young learners. (Each pair is asked to initially work independently of the other pairs who have the same paragraph assignment. This strategy allows for comparison of language and writing style at a later stage.) Stage Three and Stage Four are repeated for teaching introduction and conclusion writing.

Stage Four: Rewriting—Peer Editing and Rubrics

After the pair paragraph writing activity, the students will be ready to begin peer editing. In order for students to be able to give feedback, it is important to make

sure that students have a clear picture of the elements of a good paragraph. To help remind students and to further their understanding, a review activity with a good sample paragraph and a rubric that will help the students rank/rate and offer feedback on their classmate's writing is useful.

It is also valuable to teach students how to give feedback by giving examples of positive comments and constructive criticism. (Although some teachers have misgivings about peer editing, in the years that the Class One teacher used it, students continually exclaimed how useful it was to receive comments on their work by multiple readers.) If teachers teach their students how to give good feedback and emphasise that writing is a *process* and *a way to learn* to be a better writer, there is much less reticence about sharing work. [22]

Stage Five: Limited Research Essay

Once the students have grasped a basic understanding of essay writing conventions and demonstrated their ability to write a five-paragraph essay based on their own ideas, it is time to begin to ask students to do some research. Another topic is chosen at this point, (e.g. 'Should the legal drinking age be lowered?'). The students then engage in a number of activities to help them learn some basic skills necessary for writing an essay that is based on ideas provided by a third-party.

Sample Activities:

- Readings on the topic (provided by the teacher)
- Two sample essays (referenced) that illustrated both sides of a similar issue—Students read and 'reverse-engineer' a graphic organiser. Students also go to the online references, read and record the paragraph number and the author's or organisation's name
- Mini-debate on the topic. Contrasting personal ideas and ideas gleaned from readings
- Annotated bibliography on the topic
- Plagiarising awareness activity & paraphrasing activity
- Graphic organiser
- First draft five paragraph essay—with footnotes
- Peer editing

Having successfully completed this first preparatory phase, students are now ready for Phase Two of the Academic Writing Programme.

Phase Two: Independent Research Essay

Concerned specifically about the teacher/student issues mentioned earlier, the teacher of Class Two decided to create a writing project that would attempt to deal with these and lead her lower-level students to a position of greater writing strength and self-confidence. The project was designed as an informal 'experiment', in order to see what low-level students could produce if the expectations were clear, the process was well-staged, each student had regular feedback, relevant models were available and the task was challenging but (in light of the low proficiency level) still considered to be achievable.

[22] See Appendices Two and Three for examples of feedback rubric sheets

Stages

1. Explaining the task / Building motivation
2. Deciding on a topic
3. Gathering and selecting ideas
4. Creating an ongoing reference record
5. Planning the body of the essay
6. Writing to the plan / Modifying the plan
7. Feedback, modeling, rewriting
8. Building an introduction and conclusion
9. 'Publishing' (document presentation, peer-reading)
10. Reflecting on the process

Stage One: Explaining the Task / Building Motivation

Students receive detailed written and verbal instructions explaining the writing project and the expectations for assessment.[23] About half a period spent working through this information together allows enough time for students to ask any questions they may have.

After the project has been explained, students share their understanding of the project with each other. This ensures every student understands what is expected and again allows for questions to be asked and answered. (The essay task in the second semester of 2009 was to be *at least* 250 words in length and to contain at least three body paragraphs (not counting the introduction and conclusion), though students were told there would be no upper word limit, and if they were really interested in their topic they could write as much as they liked.)

The essay should describe or explain something that students *already know about*. They should be told the purpose of the writing, in this case the purpose was to use their essay to teach other students in the class about a topic, issue or person they were interested in. It should be made clear that there will be a *real* audience for the writing. This will encourage students to take the task seriously and to do their best work, since the quality of their writing will be 'judged' (albeit informally) by their peers.

The rationale for the writing project in relation to its role in improving academic writing generally should also be discussed, with discussion of writing that is done in other classes, as well as long-term writing requirements in senior years. Students should first be asked to work in pairs to articulate their thoughts and previous experiences (negative and positive) about writing in English generally, and academic writing in particular. Students then give feedback to a whole class discussion, which is summarised on the whiteboard. The teacher should then spend time dealing with the issues and concerns that students raise, encouraging them to view academic writing in a more positive light and offering them examples, reasons and practical strategies for this.

It is important at this point for the teacher to articulate the belief that *these* students are capable of completing a strong academic essay. Then, he/she should outline the stages that will be taken towards achieving that goal, and the reasons for completing the task in the manner described. If students know *what* they are aiming for and *why* they are working in a particular way, they will be more likely to follow instructions and to understand *how* their writing skills are being developed.

[23] See Appendix Four

The timeframe should be clear, along with the expectation that all work is to be completed in class time. Students should be asked NOT to do any written work for homework, apart from making notes while researching background information. The reason for this is to avoid putting students under 'deadline' stress during the writing process, and to avoid adding to an existing heavy homework load. More importantly, it avoids the likelihood that individual students may rush through the project simply to get it out of the way, thereby denying themselves the chance to see and retain a record of their writing development over the course of time, thus growing in understanding of the nature of the writing process itself. [24]

Stage Two: Deciding on a Topic

In the second half of the first class, after the writing project expectations have been outlined, students should be given time to peruse their notes from other classes, discuss topic ideas with each other, and to ask the teacher any further questions. It is important that this stage is not hurried, in order to give students ample time to think of a good topic idea. Their topic selection, however, should be decided before the next writing class.

In the case of the Class Two students, the topic was drawn from one of the disciplines they were studying in other MIC classes (eg. Psychology, History, Anthropology, Political Science). Students should use materials and ideas from other (content) classes, books or the Internet as the basis for a completely new piece of written work, but ought not to copy directly from any sources, notes or other writing they have previously done. (I.e. Class time should not be used to simply prepare an essay already set as an assessment or homework task by another teacher, or to rework an assignment previously completed for another teacher.)

Some class time can then be spent explaining, modeling and practising how to write a topic heading correctly (e.g. the use of punctuation conventions). Once selected, the topic (and the subject area to which it related) is written on the student's individual copy of the 'Essay Outline Sheet'[25]. This planning sheet, containing the subject area and topic is then handed to the teacher for checking and feedback.

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[24] Doing the writing in class time helped, therefore, to overtly emphasise the process nature of the academic writing project. The teacher collected and stapled each student's work together in the same order in which the writing progressed, forming a process writing 'booklet.' She made written comments and correction suggestions for each student each week, providing more language models where needed. Students would then, in the next class, rewrite the previous week's writing, making changes in keeping with the advice from their teacher, and add the edited work to an ongoing computer document after which they would then begin working on another paragraph. During class time, students were also able to provide informal peer support (as they themselves sought this), though this was not planned as an integral part of the writing process.

A pleasing observation in the Class Two programme was the noticeable jump in student motivation and teacher/student interaction as the writing proceeded. Because students were receiving a high level of individual feedback (in written form) on their writing documents, they began to seek more individual help during class time than this teacher had experienced in previous E2 writing classes. Even students who had previously been reluctant to interact with the teacher on an individual basis began to regularly seek help during the writing class in order to clarify teacher's written comments, seek advice or to ask more questions.

[25] See Appendix Five

Stage Three: Gathering and Selecting Ideas

Students who have selected a topic and written it correctly on their 'Essay Outline sheet,' are then able to use the computer suite or library immediately, in order to begin independent research.

An entire period should be given to conducting research (using books, magazines and newspapers, the Internet and/or class notes from other classes) in order to begin to gather ideas and information about which to write. Students should also be encouraged to continue to do more research in their own time in preparation for the next class, (though they should not start writing yet). It is important for the teacher to monitor students' research progress, as some students will have difficulties with this stage. It is not necessary for all research to be conducted in English,[26] though this would be preferable, as it would provide an opportunity for students to practise reading skills.

Stage Four: Creating an Ongoing Reference Record

At the start of the research stage, students should begin to keep an ongoing record of sources from which they glean information, on the 'Research Record Sheet,' (on the back of the Essay Outline Sheet. [27]) The teacher needs to check that individuals do this. A minimum of at least three references is a good guide for those who are new to academic writing, though students can be encouraged to provide more.

To make the record-keeping easier, students can be given the option of creating a word document so that they can copy, cut and paste URL addresses of sites they visit. Doing this helps to avoid having to laboriously copy these details by hand (with the possibility of making errors). This record should grow during the course of the project, and the teacher needs to check it regularly. If it is left until the end, students may forget their sources. It is also useful for students to realise, by doing this, that successful academic writers establish a habit of keeping source records *as they write*, and that this practice is required in all academic writing, not just that done for this particular class.

During this stage, if this has not already happened, there should be an open and frank class discussion reviewing the serious nature of plagiarism and its likely consequences.

Stage Five: Planning the Body of the Essay

In the next class, the teacher models how to select ideas from a wide body of information using a model text and a highlighter to identify key ideas. (Alternatively, students can be given this as an in-class task (as in Phase One). (Doing this could be a useful form of review; identifying and analysing topic sentences, for example.)

Following the model, students examine their own research notes and any other material they have gathered, and highlight *at least* three key ideas they want to cover in their essays. These should be written on the 'Essay Outline Sheet.' Extra space on the 'Essay Outline Sheet' is provided, in case more ambitious students

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[26] The use of L1 in the English Language classroom remains under discussion, though many studies generally indicate that it does not hinder L2 development at all and that L1 is, in fact, an important learning resource that teachers ought not to overlook, or deny their students. For one example, see Auerbach, E. R. (1993) Re-examining English Only in the ESL Classroom. *TESOL Quarterly* Vol 27. No. 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 9-32.

[27] See Appendix Six

decide to write more[28]. (Alternatively, students could use the graphic organiser, as in Phase One, at this point.)

Again, the teacher checks the 'Essay Outline Sheet,' (or graphic organiser) and discusses the feasibility of ideas with individuals where this is necessary. Students then make changes where appropriate. The teacher and each student alike should have a clear idea of the potential direction of the essay.

Class instruction then reviews the key elements of a topic sentence (subject and controlling idea) and how to write supporting sentences (in the form of examples and reasons), with the teacher again providing models.[29]

Students subsequently begin to work independently on the first body paragraph of their essays.

Stage Six: Writing to the Plan / Modifying the Plan

Students should begin with body paragraphs, rather than an introduction since this provides an opportunity for them to change their mind about the essay's content as they write without having to re-work an introduction that was previously constructed. If, for example, information to support ideas on the outline sheet is not readily available, students are free to change the direction of their essay provided they modify their outline (and in some instances, the wording of their topics).

Beginning this way gives students both a concrete starting point (since they have a plan) but also relieves them of the stress of having to deal with a topic that may otherwise become a kind of 'straightjacket.' It also reinforces individual 'ownership' of their essay. Having this kind of control over content allows students to consider other aspects of writing more deeply, such as the linguistic challenges and the organisational problems they face.

Stage Seven: Feedback, Modeling, Rewriting

After completing each draft paragraph on the 'Paragraph Planning Sheet,'[30] students submit this to the teacher to check. Every piece of writing for every student should be reviewed, with detailed correction suggestions and models given. (Because learners are of a lower proficiency level, and if class sizes are not large, teachers should be able to give their students' writing close attention. The low level of the students and the need to provide accurate models necessitates this, but this is compensated for by the fact that the quantity of writing to be marked is not overly onerous.)

At the start of the next lesson, the marked material is returned to students, who re-work the previous week's (checked) writing on the computer, adding it to a word document containing all of their essay's writing to date.

This document should be printed out each week and handed to the teacher, along with any new draft paragraphs begun in class that week. All material should be stapled together in order (essay outline sheet, reference record, draft paragraph

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[28] One of the most unexpected and pleasing outcomes of the writing programme in this class was the fact that ALL students exceeded the 250 minimum word-count requirement. The weakest student presented a document of 406 words, while the longest (though not the strongest) essay was 814 words long!

[29] If this phase is preceded by Phase One, less time would be required at this point, since students would already be familiar with the concepts of topic and supporting sentences and would have had practice writing basic paragraphs.)

[30] See Appendix Seven

one, edited paragraph one (computer generated), draft paragraph two, edited paragraph two, and so on). Keeping the work in order enables the student to see the progress made each week and is motivating. It also gives them a hard copy to refer to as they are typing, which is easier than flipping from one electronic document to another while writing, and minimizes the possibility that work will get 'lost'. As students see their volume of work begin to grow, and the changes that are made to it, they begin to develop a clearer understanding of the writing process. It also helps them to see the links between their original writing outline, the actual writing they subsequently do and the final product.

Stage Eight: Building an Introduction and Conclusion

Once the body paragraphs are completed, it is then easy to specify, in the introduction paragraph, what the essay will cover, since the content of the essay has already been decided and writing completed. In any case, the models for the introduction and the conclusion are more or less formulaic. Low-level students can be encouraged to follow a standardised format for their introduction and conclusion, since the intent is to provide a useful model that they can apply (with adaptation where necessary) to essays for other classes. [31] More capable students can also be given the model, but could be asked to attempt an introduction or conclusion using language of their own.

Stage Nine: 'Publishing' (Document Presentation and Peer-reading)

A cover page and the final reference page should be included at the beginning and end. Students should check and adjust the formatting where necessary. The entire essay should be printed out and all papers should be stapled together to form one document. Two copies should be given to the teacher, one to be marked and one for the peer-reading session. Students should also submit all draft material, as it is helpful for teachers to be able to comment on the growth evident in the writing over the course of the project by referring to the draft. Again, this emphasizes process, not just product.

After marking the writing, a final class should be allocated for students to read each other's work. Students should have ample time to discuss each essay with its author if they wish.

Stage Ten: Reflecting on the Process

After sharing their writing with each other in a peer-reading class, students should be given the chance to reflect on their learning through a short written task in which they are asked to comment on their progress and the value of the writing programme as they see it. [32] This will provide valuable feedback that can inform future teaching, but also gives students a chance to consider the writing experience as a whole. If they are able to identify aspects of the programme that were helpful, they can then be encouraged to apply their new skills and knowledge to other writing tasks. A final suggestion is for the teacher to summarise useful ideas from the feedback in a document to be given to students to read in their own time, as these may provide guidelines for future writing tasks. In any case, it may be

[31] See Appendix Eight

[32] See Appendix One

interesting for students to read each other's (anonymous) comments as these may help them realize their troubling writing issues are not entirely unique.

Conclusion

By combining the preparatory phase (the Class One programme) with the more independent phase (Class Two's programme), a holistic writing programme has evolved that can be used to lead students from a position of complete novice to that of a more confident academic writer.

Though the final products (academic essays) may still reflect lower language proficiency levels, most students at least, by working through the entire programme, should now appreciate the essential elements of a well-rounded piece of academic work and are better equipped to begin to transfer these new insights to written work in other classes. It is hoped, therefore, that the use of the Two-phase Academic Writing Programme will help resolve some of the more straightforward and common issues that commonly concern teachers and students alike, particularly in the first year of academic study.

Over time, it remains to be seen whether this programme will lead to actual progress in the quality of academic writing at upper levels. The implementation of the Two-phase Academic Writing Programme at lower levels, therefore, not only aims to develop lower level students' academic writing skills, but also provides an opportunity for investigation into any long-term effects on the quality of their academic writing. If significant improvements are found, as is hoped, teachers of senior students would be more free to 'fine-tune' the academic writing their upper level students produce, and focus on achieving better quality and depth of academic content, rather than having to repeatedly deal with 'fixing the basics' and last-minute or overdue written work completion issues in the latter stages of a students period of study. With a thorough grounding in basic academic writing skills in the early years of their tertiary experience, students will at least have had the necessary preparation to enable them to begin producing academic writing of a standard more appropriate to senior levels, in their third and fourth years of study.

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Appendices

Appendix One: Student Feedback on the Class Two Writing Programme

At the end of the (Phase Two) writing **programme in Class Two, students were asked to complete a fluency writing task in response to the following questions…**

"Recently, we wrote a long essay in the CCR1 (computer suite). What did you think of this learning task? Why? What did you learn about writing by doing this activity?"

Their comments were overwhelmingly positive and are provided below.

- "Before I wrote the essay, I thought I can't finish or I can't write long sentences. But you helped me when I asked some questions about my topic…and you taught me how to write, so that it was not too hard for me. Writing the essay helped me to improve my English Skill. Essay is very hard work and sometimes I feel stress, but I got the chance to think of English and my topic in good way. Writing essay taught me that I should not give up and should not feel stress. I had many time to look up on Internet or write the essay, so that I wrote very smoothly."
- "I learnt to connect sentences by doing this activity. Before I learnt about writing essay, I couldn't connect sentence…Addition to it, I learned how to use past, present and future. Before I learned this activity, I confused present and future."

- "When I wrote and think about my essay, I thought that it is very fun for me to write my essay. It is because I could write anything that is interesting for me to research.
- I learned many things from this writing activity. For example, I could learn how to write topic sentences, introduction, my conclusion and reference…I learned that I can write the long essay if I have interesting things, so this activity is very useful for me…"
- "I think that it is important to write an essay, because when I wrote the essay, I could learn about many things. For example, I could get a lot of vocabularies…"
- "I didn't think that I can write 600 words essay. I have never written more than 400 words in essay. In learning task, I was able to improve my English skills and I came to like writing…We have to write essay in other classes, so it was so useful. When I am final year, I must write thesis in order to graduate from school…"
- "In this activity, I learnt how to write sentences in correct order."
- "I never gave up because (I did it) for myself."
- "To write an essay is important for us in this college, because we have to write essays in many classes, so this activity is very useful. I learned how to write essays, to use many vocabulary and to write so people can read easily. I learned it is important to research."
- "Thanks to this writing task, I could learn how to write an essay and think about (my topic) deeply."
- "I'm thankful that you checked my wrong grammar."
- "I didn't like to write essay, but this activity made me to like writing. I learned how to write and (that I) must decide what I want to write."
- "I thought this essay was very difficult to me because I can't research, write and type fast, so finally, I (was) late...but I learned how to write the essay."
- "I learned about effort by doing this activity. I think that the activity is very good practice. Actually, I felt that my sentences were greater than last semester. Specifically, I could remember about how to make a topic sentence."
- "I think that the learning task which we wrote essay is very good for me, because I could think about my task deeply again through researching details. I learned the way to write essay and how to represent my idea about writing by doing this activity."

Appendix Two: Sample Paragraph Level Feedback / Rubric Sheet

Reader's name:	
The main idea is clearly stated in the first sentence of the paragraph.	/5
The reasons and/or support were concrete and logically related to the main idea of the paragraph. Examples of reasons/concrete support:	/5
Grammar mistakes did not interfere with your understanding Grammar problems:	/5
Please write one positive comment:	
Please write one suggestion:	

Appendix Three: Sample Essay Level Feedback / Rubric Sheet

Essay Evaluation Sheet **Name:**

Intro /10 **Thesis** ("I believe…") **/10**		**References** **/10**
Length **/10**	**Form** **/10**	**Grammar** **/5**
BP1 Idea **/5**		**BP1 support** **/5**
BP2 Idea **/5**		**BP2 support** **/5**
BP3 Idea **/5**		**BP3 Support** **/5**
Conclusion **/10**		**Transitions** **/5**

Total /100

Advice:

Positive Comment:

Appendix Four: Task Information Sheet (Class Two)

Writing a Strong Essay

Over the next few weeks, we will study how to write a strong academic essay. You will do MOST of this work IN CLASS. **Do NOT try to finish it quickly at home**, as there is much you need to learn about writing a good essay. This is why we will do it in class time.
Here is what you will do.

1. **Choose an essay topic.** Your idea for a topic should come from one of the other classes in which you study at MIC. You MUST NOT use an essay that has already been given by another MIC teacher. Your topic MUST be a NEW topic, but it should relate to your studies here.

2. **Do some research to get information about your topic.** You will have ONLY ONE class in which to do this! **REMEMBER to write down a list of the websites you visit while you do your research!** (This list will become part of your essay. Make sure it is accurate! **You will lose marks if you do NOT provide this list of references!)**

3. **Brainstorm ideas for three or more paragraphs**

4. **Write (at least three) body paragraphs**. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence and some supporting sentences that give examples and reasons for your ideas.

5. **Write an introduction paragraph to your essay**. The introduction should explain what your essay is going to be about. The information should be very general.

6. **Write a conclusion paragraph to your essay**. Your conclusion should summarise the main points you have already made in the body paragraphs. **Do NOT introduce new ideas in your conclusion.**

7. **Add the list of references to the end of your essay**.

8. **Check that your work is DOUBLE SPACED and that the paragraphs are clearly separated from each other.** Your final copy should be TYPED on a computer, NOT hand-written! (You may need to do the typing in your own time.) Your essay should be on A4 sized paper.

9. **Make a cover page** (A4 size) to put at the front of your essay. The cover page should have **your name**, the **name and course number** of the E2 class, the **topic of your essay**, the **number of words** you have written and the **number of pages** you have used (not counting the cover page).

10. **Staple everything together** in the TOP LEFT HAND corner, and give it to your teacher on the due date. (She will tell you when this is.)

Appendix Five: Essay Outline Sheet

Essay Outline Sheet

NAME: _____

Subject Area: _____

Essay Topic_____

_____

Ideas I will write about in my essay (one idea for each paragraph)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Appendix Six: Research Record

Research Record

(Include **all** website addresses, books, magazines, articles, class notes that you have used)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Teacher's comment

Appendix Seven: Paragraph Planning Sheet

Name: _____

Body Paragraph number _____

Topic sentence

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Supporting points

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Conclusion sentence

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix Eight: Writing an Introduction, Conclusion, Reference Page and Cover Sheet

X

Writing an Introduction

When you write an essay, you need to introduce your ideas to the reader.

Here is ONE way you can do this…

This essay introduces the topic " _____(*write your topic here*) _____". _____(*write the number of ideas / body paragraphs*) _____ aspects of this topic will be discussed. These include, firstly, _____(*say what the first paragraph is about*)_____. Secondly, _____(*say what the second body paragraph is about*) _____, thirdly, _____(*say what the third body paragraph is about, and so on*) _____. Finally, the essay will conclude with a short summary (*or the writer's opinion*) about the topic.

Writing a Conclusion

A conclusion can be written in a similar way. Here is ONE way to write a conclusion…

In conclusion, after discussing the ____(*number)* aspects above, we can see that the topic outlined here is a / an (*adjective + adjective eg. 'interesting and complex'*) one. In my opinion, it is a useful subject to consider because _____(*give your opinion here*) _____.

Remember to add a

- **reference page** (at the **end** of your work)
- **cover page** (at the **front**)

1. Your reference page should list **ALL the references** you used. If you used books, journals, articles or magazines, list them in alphabetical order. Make sure you put the name of the author, the publishing date and the name of the publisher.

2. Your cover page should include…

Name: _____
Name of the class: _____
Topic: _____
Word count: _____ (Do NOT count the words in the reference page or the words on the cover page)
Number of pages: _____ (Do NOT count the reference page or the cover page)

Staple everything together in the **top left-hand** corner. (See **X** above)