

A Comparison of Writing Tasks Between EAP Writing Courses and Liberal Arts Courses

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【Abstract】

This study aims to investigate the difference between writing tasks in an EAP program and mainstream educational courses at a midwestern American university. Data was collected from 300- and 400-level EAP writing courses along with two random writing samples from liberal arts courses. The Leki and Carson (1997) classification method was used to categorize the various writing types. Findings reveal a distinct difference between the types of writing tasks assigned in the EAP writing courses and the types of writing tasks assigned in liberal arts courses. This paper concludes by suggesting ways EAP instructors can better prepare students for writing tasks outside of the EAP program.

【Keywords】

EAP program, liberal arts, writing tasks, text responsibility

1. Introduction

The central purpose of university English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs is to provide non-native English speakers (NNES) with the necessary language skills that will help them succeed in their academic courses. Though EAP programs may be structured differently, their overall emphasis on reading, writing, speaking, and listening are often the same, because it is these language skills that many NNES are deficient in.

EAP writing instructors are faced with the responsibility of preparing NNES for writing assignments they will encounter in a variety of courses. There is an expectation that ESL writing courses will prepare students for writing in academic courses (Leki, 2007) by learning transfer (James, 2010). However, “if students are expected to do writing assignments that require them to interact with a text once they begin to take content courses, then they need to be adequately prepared” (Carroll & Dunkelblau, 2011, p. 279).

In a study driven by professors’ assertions that their students “can’t write” and that composition courses were not doing an adequate job of preparing students to write across the curriculum, Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, and Kreth (2010) conducted a study to examine these claims. They interviewed 14 faculty members from five of the university’s six colleges to understand what the professors meant when they stated that their students “can’t write”. Two important findings emerged from their study.

Brockman et al. (2010) found that many of the professors’ writing tasks were based on reading assignments which asked students to identify the author’s main idea. In a follow-up article, Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, and Crawford (2011) reported that professors perceived identifying the author’s main idea and summary writing as crucial to students’ academic success because it served as a study guide for students and as an evaluation tool to determine whether the students understood the material. Students’ lack of summarizing ability could be explained by the little attention summary writing is given in freshman composition courses (Hill, 1991) and ESL writing courses (Vorobel & Kim, 2011).

Professors also felt that students were not familiar with how to evaluate and integrate sources into their paper (Brockman et al., 2011). This finding was more surprising because one of the objectives of most EAP writing and freshman composition courses is to write a research paper which involves finding appropriate sources and integrating them into their paper. If professors think that students are lacking these critical writing skills, then it raises the question: What are students learning in their EAP writing courses?

To answer this question, Leki and Carson (1994) surveyed 77 NNES university

students to understand the relationship between writing tasks students were assigned in their EAP writing courses and the writing tasks they were assigned in their content courses. They found that the types of writing tasks students were assigned in their ESL writing courses are not related to the types of writing tasks they were assigned in their content courses.

In a follow-up study, Leki and Carson (1997) organized the types of writing tasks students were assigned into three categories according to the level of responsibility students had for the source text. They explained source text as “the source of the information for the text being written” (p. 40). These three categories range from students writing from personal experience (no source text), to students responding to a source but not being held accountable for explaining it (source serves as a prompt), to students writing accurate information based on a source and being held responsible for the content. Leki and Carson (1997) discovered that only ESL classes assigned writing tasks based on personal experience whereas content courses focused their writing tasks on source responsibility. They found a disconnect between the level of responsibility students had from a source text in EAP courses versus content courses.

Leki and Carson (1994, 1997) concluded in their studies that EAP writing courses often do not expose students to the types of writing tasks they will be asked to complete in their content courses. Content courses expect students to be held responsible for the readings and lectures whereas students in EAP writing courses place more emphasis on writing from no source text or from responding to a source text. This finding prompted a challenge by Leki and Carson (1994) for EAP writing instructors to “look beyond EAP classrooms to the writing demands our students will face after they leave our classes and to consider how we might prepare them for those demands” (p. 98). This study aims to examine the writing tasks students are required to write in their EAP writing courses and the writing tasks students are required to write in mainstream education courses according to the level of source text responsibility students have.

2. Method

2.1 Setting

The university in this study has a student body of over 23,000 with approximately 1,000 international students from 87 countries. Over the years, there have been a growing number of international students applying to this university. Even though many of these students have the necessary skills to succeed in the university, some of them do not have a high enough level of English language proficiency to do well. This low level of English language ability can make it difficult, if not impossible, for students to

understand lectures, communicate with classmates, comprehend readings, and write papers. To solve this problem, an EAP program was developed to raise the English language level of these non-native English speakers so their language ability would not hinder their ability to succeed in the classroom.

As part of application process, non-native English speaking international students are required to take a standardized English language proficiency test (e.g. TOEFL, IELTS) to determine if their level of English language proficiency is sufficient to succeed in their academic courses. Students who do not test above the benchmark score are conditionally admitted under the condition that they complete the EAP program. Undergraduate students are placed into one of four levels in the EAP program according to their English language proficiency standardized test score.

This university's EAP program is divided into four undergraduate levels (100-, 200-, 300- and 400-level) and one graduate level (500-level); for the purpose of this study, only the undergraduate levels will be discussed. Each level is comprised of four separate skills-based courses students are required to take: reading, writing, grammar, and speaking and listening. Once students begin taking EAP classes, they are required to pass each skill through the 400-level with a "C" or better to fulfill their conditional admission. Students in 300- and 400-level EAP courses are permitted to take mainstream educational classes along with their EAP classes. To keep this study focused, only the 300- and 400-level courses will be analyzed.

2.2 Data Collection

Data was collected from EAP lecturers, EAP writings syllabi, and students in the fall semester of 2011. To get an accurate representation of what types of writing are being assigned in EAP writing courses, writing tasks were analyzed from 300- and 400-level class syllabi and cross-referenced with the instructors to ensure the findings were accurate. In order to understand the types of writing students may encounter in their mainstream education courses, two random samples were collected from students who were enrolled in these courses. The first writing task came from a 100-level communications class and the second writing task came from a 100-level history class.

2.3 Data Analysis

To explore the relationship of source text responsibility between EAP writing courses and mainstream education courses, a categorization method was required. The classification scheme Leki and Carson (1997) developed to categorize writing tasks will be adopted for this study. The writing tasks collected will be placed in one of these three

categories:

Category A. Writing tasks that are based on students' personal experience (no source text)

Category B. Writing tasks that respond to a written or oral text. The text only serves as a prompt for the students' writing and they are not held responsible for the text.

Category C. Writing tasks that are based on a written or oral text and students must demonstrate the accuracy of what they read or observed

3. Results

3.1 EAP Writing Courses

Students in the 300-level writing course are expected to compose five types of writing: compare and contrast, cause and effect, explaining, report/interviews, and argumentative. The objective of the first four writing tasks is for students to choose a topic of and write an essay according the conventions of that genre. There are no readings or lectures for students to base their paper on (Category A). For the argumentative paper, students are asked to read a couple articles, form an opinion, and write about the topic (Category B). Then, students are supposed to support their argument by including citations from the articles (Category C).

Students in the 400-level EAP writing class are expected to compose three types of writing: summary paper, response paper, and research paper. The summary paper was based on an article chosen by the teacher and students are responsible for identifying the author's main idea and supporting details (Category C). For the response paper, students were expected to read an article chosen by the teacher and respond to one idea they agreed or disagreed with

(Category B). The third piece of writing, the research paper, students were responsible for integrating several sources to support their argument (Category C).

3.2 Liberal Arts Courses

Two writing assignments were collected from liberal arts courses. The first writing task was a critical analysis that came from a 100-level communications class. This paper asks students to analyze a speech using course material, lectures, and information from their textbook. Students are also expected to include two outside sources to support their claims (Category C).

The second writing task is from a 100-level history class. Students were asked to

write a two page paper that included three sections. In the first section, students were instructed to explain and summarize a religious ceremony they observed (Category C). Students were then asked to compare that ritual with a similar ritual in a religion they are familiar with (Category B). The third section of the paper had students write their opinion about the religious ceremony they attended (Category B). This writing task included characteristics of Categories B and C.

Table 1. EAP Writing Tasks

Category A	4
Category B	1.5
Category C	2.5
Total Writing Tasks	8

According to the data, the liberal courses did not assign writing tasks that were based on students' personal experience (Category A), whereas 50% of the EAP writing tasks did. 33% of the liberal arts courses involved responding to a source text (Category B) while only 19% of the writing tasks in the EAP writing courses included this type of writing. Last, 66% of the liberal arts courses focused on writing tasks that involved responsibility for the source text whereas this was the focus for only 31% of the EAP writing class tasks (Category C).

Table 2. Liberal Arts Writing Tasks

Category A	0
Category B	0.67
Category C	1.33
Total Writing Tasks	2

4. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to compare the types of writing tasks students were assigned in their EAP writing courses with the writing tasks they were assigned in their liberal arts courses. To explore this relationship, writing tasks were categorized by the level of responsibility students had from written or oral text. The results from the samples collected follow similar patterns as previous research (Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997; Brockman et al.; 2010; Brockman et al., 2011; Carroll & Dunkelblau, 2011): a majority of EAP writing tasks are written from personal experience whereas a majority of liberal arts writing tasks are written from readings or oral texts.

These findings are important for EAP instructors because it provides a comparison between EAP writing tasks and mainstream education writing tasks. However, this study does have limitations. Only two writing samples from liberal arts courses were analyzed so these findings cannot be generalized. Last, this study found students in the EAP writing courses are assigned tasks where they are responsible for the content of a source text; however, this study did not account for how the writing task was assessed. Even though students were responsible for the source they drew their information from in their EAP research paper, it is not known if students were graded on the accuracy of the content or more on the organization/grammar/ mechanics of their paper. Additional research would provide a more accurate comparison between the EAP program and liberal arts writing tasks.

Leki and Carson (1997) report “that in their English classes [students] were generally not held responsible for the specific content of any texts read in support of writing assignments but that in their disciplinary courses they were” (p. 46). This is an important finding that should encourage EAP writing instructors to incorporate more source responsibility in their writing tasks. For example, one common writing task students are assigned is to write a compare/contrast essay about their hometown and the city in which they are studying. To improve this task, the instructor could provide students with two texts about different cities to compare and contrast, thus holding students accountable not only for the writing style and mechanics, but for the information in the text as well. If EAP writing instructors want to prepare students for the types of writing tasks they will encounter when they leave the EAP program, then they should design more writing tasks that hold students accountable for the content of a source text.

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