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Beyond “Help!” – Diagnosing the L2 Writer’s Essay: A Strategies-Based Approach

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Abstract

Sometimes, even an experienced second-language (L2) writing teacher can feel frustrated at the multitude of problems in their students’ writing. In response, this article describes five common diagnoses and presents treatment strategies to help students and teachers overcome their frustration and make progress. The maladies are dubbed by the authors as *graphophobia* (writer’s block), *extreme myopia* (inability to focus), *hypocognition* (lack of critical thinking), *alexia* (unwillingness to read one’s own writing), and *chronic lockjaw* (persistent inexpressiveness).

Introduction

Among all the discussion of feedback in second language (L2) academic writing, the question of teacher response is rarely mentioned. When faced with a particularly thorny pile of essays, even the most experienced teacher occasionally reacts with an impassioned “*Help!*” After all, the quantity and quality of problems in an L2 writer’s text at any level can be overwhelming and the task of fixing them daunting. It is perhaps for this reason that the five-paragraph essay is so attractive as a fallback position: it represents a safe, if stultifying, alternative to the chaos of a developing paper (Caplan, in press; Caplan, McCullough, & Stokes, 2006).

However, if the only strategy available to academically-oriented L2 students is an inadequate formula (Rorschach, 2004), they will be ill-prepared for their college-level classes. In the metaphor of one university writing center: “Writing a five-paragraph theme is like riding a bicycle with training wheels [...]. Once you can write well without it, you can cast it off and never look back” (“College Writing,” n.d.). In other words, both the teacher and student need strategies which go beyond “*Help!*” and move towards academic writing.

In order to do this, it is first necessary to diagnose the nature of the writer’s problems. Symptoms exist at two levels: “surface features” and “deep features” (Elbow, 1991). The surface features of writing are those most commonly addressed in ESL textbooks, namely thesis statements, topic sentences, adverbial sentence connectors, paragraph unity, introductions, and conclusions (Caplan, McCullough, & Stokes, 2006). To that list might be added mechanics, spelling, and one-inch margins. Notwithstanding the value of all of these surface features in a good academic paper, it is the deep features which deserve more attention and which require a toolbox of strategies from which to draw:

I suspect students can learn the surface features of academic style better if they have first made good progress with the underlying intellectual practices. When students are really succeeding in doing a meaty academic task, then the surface stylistic features are more likely to be integral and

organic rather than merely an empty game or mimicry. (Elbow, 1991, p. 150)

The following five maladies all interfere with the “underlying intellectual practices” of academic writing. After a presentation of the symptoms and a discussion of the seriousness of each ailment, strategies for treatment will be offered. The medical metaphor, of course, is simply a metaphor: L2 writers are not sick, and these are common conditions for many writers. Nonetheless, by recognizing the “deep” problems in an essay and breaking down the “meaty” tasks of both teaching and learning writing into manageable micro-skills, each with its own strategies, it is possible to move far beyond “*Help!*”

Diagnosis 1: *Graphophobia*, or “writer’s block”

Symptoms

Graphophobia refers to the fear and avoidance of writing, that is, to conditions that interfere with the act of writing itself. For a variety of reasons, writers of all skill levels may “get stuck” even before they begin to write. Because this malady is marked by an absence of writing, it may easily be misidentified as laziness, rebellion, cheating, or psychological neurosis.

In general, graphophobia applies to a range of difficulties or obstacles and may appear as any of the following behaviors: difficulty articulating concepts and getting them down on paper; minimalistic writing with a lack of expressiveness; plagiarism; failure to meet deadlines; missing class or coming in late; disruptive behavior; and looking uncomfortable, bored, or unhappy.

Causes

Writing is an intellectually intimidating task because there is a common human tendency to associate the quality of writing with the writer’s intelligence (Bruce, 2004, quotes an ESL student who was worried that writing center tutors would find her writing so bad that they would “laugh at it or get angry at me,” p. 32). Furthermore, writing involves grappling with the unknown, with awareness and feelings that we have not yet put into words, in short, for dealing with parts of our experience that we barely understand. When we begin, we do not know what we will write, and for many, that lack of knowledge is uncomfortable and disorienting. Caught between hoping to excel and not yet knowing what we want to say, it is easy to freeze, for the mind to go silent, for apprehension and discomfort to gain center stage. We stop — and get stuck.

Some of the many ways in which students may experience difficulty include the following: basic performance fear inhibiting the ability to think and write, inability to bridge the gap between mind and paper, difficulty negotiating levels of cognitive and syntactic complexity between the L1 and L2, lack of sufficient knowledge or experience with the topic, lack of a clear communicative goal, uncertainty about where to start, and not spending enough time on task.

Treatments

#1—Helping students overcome “performance fear”

To help students gain fluency in their writing, students and their teachers need to de-emphasize “doing it right,” that is, grades and the necessity to excel, so that the writing class can be a place where students feel free to experiment with, learn from, and use their mistakes. It is helpful to regularly use ungraded, in-class writing activities that appeal to students’ imaginations and real interests. Such low-stakes, informal, or “private” writing (Elbow & Belanoff, 1995) can include freewriting (focused and unfocused), free-association narratives, and a variety of writing games and activities (see, for example, Peterson, 1996).

Students with writing blocks also respond well to writing activities which use a clear model and a specific writing strategy. The following model uses a contrast strategy to help students write an introduction to an essay about the challenging nature of Michigan winters:

Summers in Michigan are delightful. Blue skies and lush, green fields make our world colorful and bright. Long, sunny days offer plenty of time to enjoy outdoor activities like swimming, boating, horse-back riding, and picnicking — or just a simple day in the park. Best of all, summertime is the season for outdoor festivals. There are innumerable county fairs, music festivals, and art festivals, enough to satisfy every taste. However, when the bright days of summer are over, winter comes to Michigan, and our days of warmth and leisure are at an end.

After studying the model, students use the contrast strategy to write an introduction for the opposite thesis, that despite the challenges of winter, summers in Michigan offer many delights.

Perhaps the best remedy for graphophobia is for teachers to increase the amount of class time spent on both low-stakes and high-stakes writing. According to Elbow (1997), low-stakes writing improves the quality of high-stakes writing. Moreover, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde in *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools* (1998), assert that teachers should “increase class time spent on writing whole, original pieces through every stage of the writing process” (p. 82). In their experience, abundant in-class writing has proved helpful in significantly increasing the quantity of writing by students who previously wrote little on first-drafts and who self-identified themselves as “hating writing.”

To work with students with extreme forms of graphophobia, an individual approach is recommended. Often a sympathetic teacher who takes the time to ask the student questions and make suggestions can help the student move forward. Talking through the difficulties can help students identify the “missing steps” in the process.

#2—Help students negotiate the gap between mind and paper

Some students think too fast to be able to get their words down onto paper. These students must understand the need to slow down their thinking in order to write. If this does not work, students can record their ideas at a faster rate (for example, audio recording, typing directly onto a computer, or dictating to a listener).

In some cases, teachers can “jump start” the process by asking the student questions and then writing down his/her spoken answers.

#3—Help students negotiate the gap between the L1 and L2

Some L2 students compose their thoughts with a high degree of intellectual complexity in the L1 and try to translate it directly into the L2. As a result, their writing may exhibit strange and convoluted syntax and a complex but incomprehensible vocabulary. Teachers need to help these students adapt the complexity of their thoughts and vocabulary in the L1 to the limitations of their grammar & vocabulary in the L2. The students need to learn to simplify their complex thoughts to match the level of grammar and vocabulary that they can control in the L2.

Teachers can ask students to take a complex idea—for example, the greenhouse effect—and explain it very, very simply in writing, as if they were explaining it to a 10-year-old child. Then students can compare their examples, and the teacher can elicit a collaborative model on the overhead projector.

#4—Use experiential learning techniques

Poor writing inevitably results when students do not understand or care about what they are writing. Thus, it is essential that the teacher select activities and topics that tap students’ own experiences and motivation (Silva, 1997). When teachers are ready to move into academic writing projects on topics with which the students do not have considerable familiarity, teachers can use a variety of in-class activities to increase students’ experiential base (such as literature, movies, expert visitors, interactive lessons, and field trips).

Diagnosis 2: *Extreme Myopia*, or inability to focus

Symptoms

Extreme myopia describes the failure to focus on a central, unifying idea or theme. At the sentence level, the writing might be clear but the ideas so general and vague that the paper lacks concrete substance, rather like an unfocused photograph. Or the paper may contain many ideas with little indication of their relationship or relative significance, not unlike a “cluttered” image in which many elements are jumbled together with no unifying design. Often the reader feels tired after reading such a paper and experiences a strong urge to call for “*Help!*”

Common symptoms of lack of focus may include: introductions that begin with “the creation of the universe” (i.e., a topic so broad that there is no way to discuss it accurately within the paper); thesis statements that have no relevance to either introduction or essay; inadequate topic development, or several possibly related topics somewhat developed; or a purpose for writing which is unclear to the reader, the writer, or both.

Writers who have not found a purpose for writing cannot find a focus, resulting in trivial discussions or, worse, semi-coherent ramblings, possibly padded with many lines of quoted material. Like pouring water into a narrow-necked glass while blindfolded, the writer splashes around a great deal, but the reader goes thirsty.

Treatments

Myopic writing can be treated at two levels: at the pre-writing stage and through revision. During prewriting, the teacher can use a question-based activity to help the students focus their thinking. In this activity, students write a series of questions about their topic and then select the two best questions, writing each one at the top of an empty sheet of paper. Next, students use focused freewriting (Elbow & Belanoff, 1995, p. 12) to answer each question. The answer to Question #1 might form the basis for an introduction to the essay and the thesis. The answer to Question #2—especially if it is a “why” or “how” question—could form the basis for the body of the essay.

For example, a common essay topic is to write about a person who was influential in one’s life. For this essay, the first question is: “Who was the person who most greatly influenced your life?” The second is: “How did this person influence you?”

An alternative treatment is to wait until students have completed a draft and then help them to locate and improve its focus. To do this, the teacher presents students with a model essay (on computer or OHP) in which the following are highlighted in different colors: the analytical framework of the essay, i.e., the thesis and supporting ideas (yellow); evidence such as facts, statistics, examples, or expert opinion (orange); and the writer’s commentary upon or analysis of the evidence (green). Then, the teacher provides students with colored highlighters and asks them to highlight these elements in their own papers. It is helpful for the teacher to circulate and ask pertinent questions, i.e., “How is that idea related to this one?” Highlighting is an excellent way to make the connections between ideas (or lack thereof) visible (D. Hinrichsen, personal communication, April 30, 2008).

With sufficient prewriting and analysis of the architecture of the essay, myopic L2 writers can learn to find and maintain focus in their writing. In addition, the self- and peer-review techniques described for Diagnosis 4, below, can also assist writers with focus problems. The prognosis for such students should, therefore, be positive.

Diagnosis 3: *Hypocognition*, or a lack of critical thinking

Symptoms

Hypocognition, literally the underuse of thought, is the appropriate diagnosis for the writer who uses many words but says nothing. What is lacking is the mode of inquiry of particular importance to academic writing, that of critical thinking (Ballenger, 2007). This is a notoriously difficult term to define, but Sullivan (2006) provides a useful “starting place for discussion” (p. 16) in his introductory essay titled *What is “College-Level” Writing?* Sullivan proposes that academic essays should be written “in response to an article, essay, or reading selection that contains at least some abstract content ...[and] require[s] extended engagement and concentration” (pp. 16-17), and that writers should minimally show “some skill at

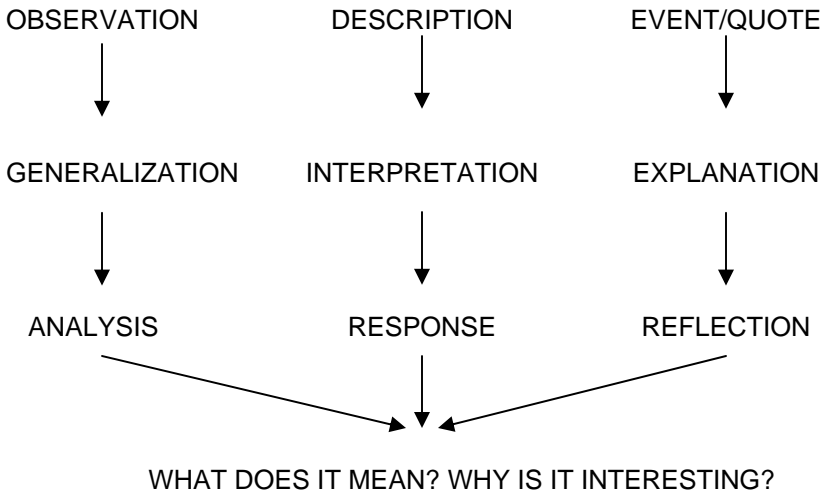
analysis and higher-order thinking” (p. 17). It is this higher-order thinking which the hypocognitive student lacks or fails to demonstrate.¹

As a result, L2 writing, even at relatively high levels of linguistic competence, is often an unanalyzed list of facts, observations, and quotations, or, at worst, would be called plagiarism in academic classes. Another common symptom is the lack of development such as exemplification, explanation, justification, or evaluation. In sum, the essay fails to engage with the topic and enter into an academic dialogue. The cause of this problem is generally an incomplete understanding of the nature of academic writing in U.S. universities, in which writers are expected not only to show comprehension of texts and facts, but to use them in the service of their own argumentation (“College Writing”, n.d.). As all university students can be expected to encounter “text-responsible” (Leki & Carson, 1997) expository writing assignments during their studies in the U.S. (Hale et al., 1996), untreated hypocognition has a grim prognosis.

Treatments

Since hypocognition often stems from a lack of awareness of the critical thinking skills needed in analytical writing, it is essential to provide writers with contexts in which critical thinking is essential and to draw their attention to the difference between observation and analysis. Similarly to the treatment for *graphophobia*, breaking the task down and modeling the thinking process can provide a remedy. Students can learn and use strategies to engage in critical thinking.

The following activity leads writers through the process of analyzing a quotation, fact, example, or statistic. It begins with a “minilecture” on the difference between observation and analysis, which presents the following schematic (adapted from Elbow & Belanoff, 1995, p.140 and Peterson, 1996, p. 49):



¹ For a further discussion of the cultural dimension of critical thinking, see Caplan (in press).

As an example of the use of this system, students are asked to consider this *observation*: “Most U.S. universities require students to take writing classes.” A possible *interpretation* or *explanation* would be that universities must believe that incoming freshmen need to improve their writing before continuing with their academic studies. There are many ways to *respond to* or *analyze* this; for instance, it could mean that high-school seniors graduate with insufficient writing ability, or that universities recognize a difference between high-school and college-level writing, or that colleges view expository writing as the foundation of academic success.

In groups, students then work through the analytical process with a variety of observations, events, and quotations which might be found in an academic essay. A favorite example is the following extract from the non-fiction book, *Bird by Bird*:
Thirty years ago, my older brother, who was 10 years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write. (It) was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin . . . and he was sitting at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task. Then, my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.” (Lamott, 1994, p. 19)

Working through the schematic, students describe the situation (for instance, by a summary or paraphrase); next, they interpret Lamott’s father’s cryptic advice; and finally, they analyze what the anecdote means for writing and life in general. This strategy also works well in a sustained content-based course (see Murphy & Stoller, 2001; Pally, 2000) where the teacher can draw important quotations from a novel or other text which the class is studying.

This treatment, when used in conjunction with feedback on multi-draft essays, can have positive effects. As evidence, what follows is an extract from a high-intermediate student’s essay on *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), a young adult novel about two rival gangs of teenagers, the Socs and the Greasers:

2nd draft: [Dally] decides to suicide because he feels that life is without meaning if Johnny is not alive. He chooses to suicide by police because he thinks he should die as a hero.²

3rd draft: [Dally] decides to commit suicide because he feels that life is without meaning if Johnny is not alive. The fact that he chooses to commit suicide by police because he thinks that he should die in a heroic situation. In fact, this idea is a reflection from the way that Johnny deals with Dally because Johnny considers Dally as a hero.

In the early draft, the writer makes an observation about the death of one of the characters, and he begins to interpret it in terms of Dally’s friend, Johnny. However, in the next draft, he analyzes the connection between Dally’s suicide and Johnny’s opinion of him as a hero. There is still work to do on this section of the essay, but the evidence of critical thinking is clearer.

Hypocognition is a long-term condition which requires frequent, persistent treatment. However, inasmuch as critical thinking is a culturally-constructed mode of writing, students can learn different ways to develop and express ideas and opinions.

² Student writing is reprinted verbatim and with permission.

Diagnosis 4: *Alexia*, or the unwillingness to read one's own writing

Symptoms

Writing by those who suffer from *alexia* (as it is defined in this paper) is characterized either by a lack of improvement over successive drafts or by problems in logic, development, organization, or language which the student could have remedied without teacher intervention. Part of the frustration in teaching such writers is suspecting that feedback is being ignored and that words are pouring from the student's keyboard directly to the teacher's desk, hence the "*Help!*" reflex.

This lack of engagement with one's own writing suggests a lack of concern for the reader and a lack of responsibility for clarity of language. It is important for writers to be their own first readers so that they can write with more awareness of their audience.

Treatments

Judicious application of peer and self review can help overcome alexia. However, writers must also be held accountable for their use of these critiques. Although there may be resistance to giving and receiving critical comments (see Hinkel, 2004, p. 45-47 for a review of the literature), peer review is valuable not only for the feedback offered by readers, but also for focusing writers' attention on their own texts. The following sequence of strategies can be used over the course of a multi-draft essay:

1. Self review of the first draft (see, e.g., Williams & Evans, 2000). Students re-read and critique their own writing, answering questions about their focus, development, organization, and language. This could, in fact, be done after any or all drafts as it draws students' attention to aspects of their own writing which they might not have read carefully before.
2. The self-review prompts peer review because now writers have specific questions to ask their peers in addition to any questions the teacher asks. Questions which elicit thoughtful answers are more useful than yes/no checklists; for example, "What is the main idea of the essay? Is this idea clear?" rather than "Does the essay have a thesis statement?"
3. Students then complete a response to the peer review, in which they identify their peers' advice, decide whether to use it, and justify their actions. This holds writers accountable for their choices and gives them a plan for revision. Peer review can be repeated after successive drafts; this makes the writers further accountable for their revisions.
4. After the teacher has commented on a draft (for example, the second draft), students complete a response to teacher feedback, in which they explain the teacher's suggestions and say how they will revise the paper.
5. Once the essay is approaching its final form, students produce a grammar draft. They use "self-editing skills" (Hinkel, 2004, p. 49) to check for common errors. One method is to have students find all the verbs and verify the tense and agreement, followed by nouns (articles, number), conjunctions, and so forth.

6. It is not obvious that the skills learned in one essay will be transferred to the next assignment, let alone to another course. However, one way to help students reflect on their process and progress is to have them write a “cover letter” (Elbow & Belanoff, 1995, p. 16-17) or other form of self-evaluation. In this letter, the writer discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the paper and evaluates the usefulness of the feedback they received throughout the process. They can also reflect on what they have learned from the experience and what they will do differently next time.

Critical feedback can be a difficult pill to swallow, but the goal of these strategies is to make *alexia* students aware of their writing from a reader’s perspective and, ultimately, to help them become successful and independent academic writers.

Diagnosis 5: *Chronic Lockjaw*, or persistent inexpressiveness

Symptoms

The final diagnosis is probably ubiquitous for L2 writers: despite other qualities of the writing, ideas are obscured, confused, or rendered incomprehensible due to errors of grammar and lexis. Although it is certainly true that “without clear, reasonably accurate, and coherent text, there can be no academic writing in a second language” (Hinkel, 2004, p. x), other diagnoses should be treated first since accurate prose without ideas, content, focus, and revision can also not be considered academic writing.

Treatment

Students need explicit instruction in the linguistic tools with which to do the kinds of critical thinking and development which college-level writing demands (see, e.g., Hinkel, 2004). One such tool is the Academic Word List, or AWL (Coxhead, 2000), the 570 word families which a corpus analysis has identified as common across many academic disciplines. Care needs to be taken with this list because it was developed to aid students’ receptive skills (especially reading comprehension), so its relevance to production remains questionable. Still, the AWL is a good starting point, and textbooks such as Huntley (2006) and Zwier (2002) demonstrate ways to teach and use the words. It is important to introduce words at the point at which they can be used by the writer. For example, when an essay encourages students to make connections between ideas and texts (what a traditional rhetoric might call a compare/contrast paper), words such as *link*, *be associated with*, *accompany*, and *be characteristic of* can allow writers to express their ideas clearly. This strategic approach to teaching vocabulary at the point of need bypasses the frustration that most L2 learners have with never knowing enough words.

It is easier to define a grammar curriculum for academic writing than a vocabulary list. Thanks to large-scale corpus analyses (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Hinkel, 2004), common and useful structures can be identified, including passive voice, nominalization, demonstrative pronouns, modals of certainty, impersonal constructions, noun clauses, subordination, certain linking verbs, adverbial clauses, and selected (mostly real) conditional structures.

A good treatment plan for chronic lockjaw, however, needs to target the intersection between vocabulary and grammar known as “lexicogrammar” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 13). For instance, certain verbs are very common in perfect tenses in writing; others occur frequently in the passive, while many transitive verbs which theoretically have a passive form are rarely seen in this voice in academic writing. Strategic teaching accepts that it is impossible to cover all aspects of the lexicogrammar system and instead focuses students’ attention on the ways that academic writers make meaning in their texts.

Conclusion

It is probably impossible to make writing and the teaching of writing easy, but they can be made more manageable through the techniques described above. Once the underlying “deep” problems with the essay or writing process have been correctly diagnosed, the teacher and writer can draw on appropriate strategies and begin to see progress.

Author Note

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