

Developing the Skill of Critically Responding to Texts

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Abstract

International students, with a good command of the language, often join English medium graduate programs believing that their language ability will be sufficient for them to get through their studies. However, many have inadequate knowledge of the academic skills they will need to perform in order to be successful. This is especially so when considering that students come from different countries and cultures with varied educational and academic backgrounds and expectations. One of the early, essential skills that students need to develop is being able to read texts critically and in turn being able to respond critically to those texts. This paper will look at how these problems can be addressed in a practical way by providing students with techniques not only in how to read critically, but also in how to frame their own responses within acceptable parameters through the process of writing a position paper. Techniques to be highlighted include compiling annotated bibliographies, writing comparative critiques, qualifying claims and arguments, and preparing peer feedback reports.

Introduction

Many international students join English medium graduate programs with a good command of the language but with little knowledge and/or experience of the specific academic skills that they will be expected to develop or perform (see Bjork, Bräuer, Reineker, Stray Jörgensen, 2003). As Hyland (2003) points out, it is not the inability to write that is the problem for many students but their ability to «acquire the literacy skills of a new culture» (p49). This can be very problematic when the requirements of the new culture are very different from the ones the student has come from and particularly for students who come from cultural and educational backgrounds «where they have been trained to absorb knowledge dispensed by their teachers

and not dissect scholarly texts,» (Belcher 1995, p137). As Hyland and Hamp-Lyons suggest, students need to «gain fluency in the conventions of English language academic discourse to understand their disciplines and navigate their learning» (2002 p1). One of the early, essential skills that students need to develop is that of being able to read texts critically and in turn being able to respond critically to those texts. As Woodward-Kron notes, «in Western tertiary contexts, critical analysis is firmly established as one of the most desirable characteristics of student writing» (2002 p121). Making knowledge claims not only involves reporting information, but negotiating with prior texts and persuading the discourse community to accept new claims (Hunston, 1994, Hyland 2001). Therefore

students need to engage with the community in question and become familiar with its cultural practices and linguistic usage. International students often have problems with this because they see themselves as novices in the new discourse community (Canagarajah 2002) and they may feel intimidated in questioning and criticizing authority (Belcher 1995.)

This paper, based on the teaching of post-graduate Economics students, will look at how the problems highlighted above can be practically addressed by providing students techniques not only in how to read critically, but also how to frame their own critical responses within acceptable parameters through the process of writing a position paper. Techniques to be highlighted include compiling annotated bibliographies, writing comparative critiques, qualifying claims and arguments, and preparing peer feedback reports.

Background

The Institute

The Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education (CERGE) offers a US – accredited Ph.D. program in Economics undertaken in English. Students come from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds, with the majority coming from Central and Eastern Europe, Russia and the former Soviet Union, and the Central Asian Republics.

The main role of the English Department (ED) is to provide support and develop the academic skills students need to successfully undertake the requirements of the Ph.D. program. The core of this support is provided by mandatory courses which students take during their first two years of study. The main aim of the first year courses (Academic Writing One and Two) is to develop the students' critical thinking, reading and writing skills to the point that by the end of the year students are able to provide credible and constructive opinion on several papers on the same topic as well as take a position through their own considered opinion. In the second year (Combined Skills One and Two) there is an emphasis in the courses on the students' more immediate needs. The fall semester course concentrates on presentation skills and grant proposal writing. The main emphasis of the spring semester, in cooperation with Economics faculty, is a course designed to assist students in writing critical literature reviews in preparation for the dissertation proposals they will need to submit in the fall of their third year. This paper

will concentrate on how we try to develop the students' critical skills through the writing of a position paper in the second semester of their first year.

Teaching Approach

In all the ED courses, a process–genre approach to teaching (as advocated by Johns 2004, Badger and White 2000, Swales 1990) is deemed to be the most suitable, using only discipline specific materials of the genres required by the relevant discourse community. Through genre analysis we hope to raise awareness of the possibilities writers have available to them as it is widely acknowledged that writing needs to be informed of the genres and choices available (Bhatia 1993, 1999, Johns 1997, 2003, Paltridge 2002, Hyland 2003). As Paltridge (2002 p90) points out, «Focusing on genre and text type in the EAP classroom provides a context in which students can gain access to academic discourse that will, hopefully, enable them to participate more successfully in academic settings.» This then enables students to transfer their analytical skills to other different genres, to see the options available to them and ultimately allows their creativity to craft their own informed writing through a writing process involving drafting, reviewing and revising. The writing courses offered by the department are supported by a major commitment to one-to-one conferences, which are designed to provide an exchange of ideas, thoughts and opinions between the student and tutor. While the tutor is there to provide advice on options and choices available (Bellers and Smith 2004, Smith 2006) ultimately it is the students' responsibility «to decide what to use, if any, they might want to make of the insights reached. ... [our role or] our *primary* responsibility may become best seen as providing opportunities for engendering those kinds of rhetorical awareness» (Swales 2001 p54).

The Position Paper

A position paper was chosen as the means of addressing the problems highlighted above because the position paper is a type of academic paper that demands that students are not only able to critically read but critically respond to texts as well as adding their own considered conclusions based on the sources they have read. The writing center at the University of Hawaii suggests that the goal of a position paper is to «convince the audience that your own opinion is valid and worth listening to. Ideas that you are considering need to be

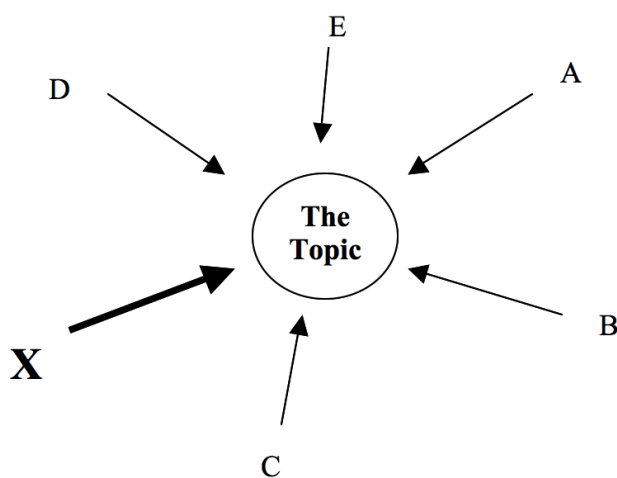
carefully examined in choosing a topic, developing your argument, and organizing your paper.¹

A position paper is defined by the English Department (ED) at CERGE as follows:

A «position paper» takes a definite position on a topic in relation to other positions on the same topic. The other positions are shown through a selective and critical review of the literature on the topic. The position of the position paper should be distinct from the other positions, and should be clearly explained and supported in reference to the other positions.²

A position paper can be conceptualized graphically as below:

«X» is the position of the position paper (the student's position; A through E represent other textual positions on the topic (the number of other textual positions will vary). X is the most important position of the position paper, even if X is closely related to another position. If X largely agrees with another textual position, the paper still needs to contain a new argument, not a repetition of the other position. X must also be situated in relation to the other positions, and the other positions must be represented accurately.



1 Taken from <http://homepages.uhwo.hawaii.edu/~writing/position.htm>. Further discussion on the requirements and format of a position paper can be found at the web pages of the Center for Academic Writing of Central European University in Budapest at <http://web.ceu.hu/writing/position.htm>

2 The definition, diagram, and criteria for a position paper at CERGE are taken from teaching materials prepared by the English Department

The following criteria are presented to students to provide an indication of what is regarded as an acceptable Position Paper (PP) with reference to the ED PP definition:

1. Selection of source(s): This must be done judiciously and purposefully for the construction of the student's PP.
2. Critical review of the sources: This must not be just a summary plus critical comment for each source, but a display of why and how the source fits into the PP as a whole.
3. Position: This should be something new and not just a repetition of one of the other arguments; the writer should show ownership of these ideas by committing to them and making the position explicit and argued in the PP. The writer cannot have a «position» in which they simply agree with one of the sources.

The Course

The course itself consists of the following relevant components:

- Critical Reading and Thinking
- Annotated Bibliography
- Comparative Analysis
- Consideration of Claims and Arguments
- Peer Feedback Reports
- Individual and Joint Consultations
- Various Drafts of the Position Paper

Besides these components other areas such as revision of reading skills, citation techniques, and how to write introductions, conclusions and abstracts are also included in the course. (See appendix 1 – sample course outline).

Students are expected to come up with their own topic and focus for their position paper, and present this as a paragraph proposal at the beginning of the course. This is done to give students responsibility and full ownership of the research they are about to undertake. This is also a far more realistic situation given that they are post graduate research students than for the tutor to «impose» or select the topics. (See Flowerdew 2005 and Benesch 2001 for further discussion on topic selection). To help them develop their research skills to find suitable sources, they are also given a workshop by library staff on research techniques familiarizing them with the databases available in the library and how to use these efficiently. At the beginning of the course students are

also given two or three examples of previous successful position papers, which are referred to throughout the course to exemplify points being made. We use more than one example because this avoids the possibility of <modeling> texts providing the students an opportunity to see a variety of available options (Flowedew 2000). Johns (1979) advises that «when we analyze genres, we should attempt to examine more than one text, thereby assisting students in hypothesizing about what is repeated from other texts and what has been revised for a particular text» (p 39).

Critical Reading and Thinking

This session is basically an introduction to the course and a revision of skills that students will have covered during the fall semester in Academic Writing One. By getting them to consider critical thinking as a process and the kind of barriers that can inhibit critical thinking (adapted from *Critical Thinking Skills* by Stella Cottrell (2005)) and also the kind of critical questions that need to be considered when reading and analyzing an academic text, we want to raise students awareness of their own abilities and the type of critical skills they will need to employ in their research.

Annotated Bibliography

The annotated bibliography is used as a tool for students to be able to succinctly summarize the sources they are intending to use, plus provide an initial opportunity to offer some critical comment on the sources in relation to their own position on the topic under research. Thus the purpose of the annotated bibliography can be summed up as³:

- To help develop a thesis position
- To help select the most relevant sources for the paper
- To help establish relationships between the sources
- To help other researchers/peers/instructor
- To create a bibliographical trail
- As an organizational tool

Students can then present some initial idea of the possible positions available on their topic and the relationship between those positions. They are encouraged to modify, update, and develop their annotated bibliographies as they carry out further research to

³ Some of the material for this session was adapted from OWL at Purdue University – Annotated Bibliographies available at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/01/>

keep these relationships constantly in focus. The initial bibliography will normally consist of a minimum of three sources but usually contain comments on about five sources to provide a reasonable representation on the various positions available. At this stage the students are also offered an individual one to one consultation with their tutors to discuss their research to date and on how they see their research/topic developing.

*Comparative Analysis*⁴

Having done some initial research and having identified some initial sources on their research topic, students now need to be able to show the relationship in writing between these sources relative to each other and in connection with the theme of the position paper. This is done through means of a comparative analysis. As Giltrow (1995) states:

Comparison is one technique for satisfying the conditions evoked by the scholarly genres. It produces knowledge by setting up a particular relationship among data – that of similarity and/or difference – and it interprets this relationship by means of abstractions important to the scholarly disciplines (p199).

In writing the analysis we not only want students to be able to compare the sources that appear on their initial annotated bibliographies but are also able to identify a particular relationship between the sources, as Giltrow suggests above, so that they can focus the analysis based on the main aim of the position paper. The comparison therefore provides a frame of reference and grounds for the analysis as well as being an organizational tool. A good comparative analysis can serve as a pre draft of the actual position paper.

Consideration of Claims and Arguments

Before submitting the first draft of the position paper we provide students with input on qualifying claims as well as on argumentation.⁵ We feel this is necessary because once students have identified the sources they are going to use to represent the other positions on the topic apart from their own, they need assistance in

⁴ Some materials adapted from Harvard Writing Center How to Write a Comparative Analysis available at <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CompAnalysis.html>

⁵ In connection with these areas, at this point in the course we also provide input on citation techniques so that students are citing sources correctly and are also avoiding inadvertent plagiarism.

providing acceptable responses to the sources they are critically analyzing.

The material for strength of claims is based around the findings of Hyland (2000) on the use of evaluative language and on the use of modal verbs to state probability found in Swales and Feak (2004). By doing these activities students soon recognize that it is very easy to change the strength of claim being made and also that through using a different modal the claim can be subtly altered. In association with these activities we also highlight the use of claims from previous position papers and ask students their opinions on the claims being made in these examples.

Material on argumentation includes adaptations from Epstein and Kernberger (2005), Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2003) and Wood (2001). What we want students to consider are the claims they are making about the sources they are analyzing in the context of the reasons for the claims being made along with the evidence provided to support those claims. This can be summarized as:

Claims

- Is the claim clear?
- Is the claim specific?
- Is the claim significant?

Reasons

- What reasons support the claim?
- Are these reasons relevant?
- Are there logical leaps (inductive/deductive) from reason to claim?

Evidence

- What evidence supports the reasons?
- Is the evidence sufficient, relevant, and reliable?
- Are there inductive leaps from evidence to reason?

We also want students to be aware themselves of how a reader may question their arguments and thus they must be ready to address any weaknesses by being able to question their own arguments by being able to:

- Question their own claims
- Question the relevance and sufficiency of the reason(s)
- Question the reliability and sufficiency of the evidence

- Acknowledge questions for which they have no response

Again we ask students to look at previous examples of argumentation before looking at their own drafts and to consider the effectiveness of their own argumentation. This should then further raise self-awareness of the kind of critical comments they are making in response to the sources they have used before submitting the first draft of the actual position paper.

Peer Feedback Reports

When handing in the first draft of the position paper we also ask students to prepare a feedback report on the draft of one of their peers. These are then distributed to each peer and the tutor before a paired conference. We do this because the report provides assistance to a student's colleague by providing considered comments and criticism and also gives the author practice in presenting critical comments concisely and constructively, *skills which we are trying to develop through the process of writing a position paper*. I have found that these reports lead to very productive conferences as the students are not only able to give comments on the use of the sources and the position taken in their colleague's paper but can also offer subjective specific comments that I may not be able to give; this is particularly so if pairs can be made up of students who have similar interests and research topics. This process is often repeated on the second draft of the paper.

The process does not replace or undermine the importance of one-to-one conferences between tutor and students. The paired conferences are held in conjunction with individual ones. At the individual conferences more substantive discussion is held on language, coherence and organizational matters as well as discussion on points that would not be discussed in front of a student's peer. It is also at these consultations that matters of number of drafts and deadlines are agreed though the final deadline for all students generally remains the same. Following on from the input provided above the process of redrafting and conferencing will continue until the final draft is submitted. Most students write and receive feedback on three drafts of the paper.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at how the problem of developing the critical skills of international students can be addressed. In particular, through the process writing of a position paper, it has presented techniques in helping students frame their own critical responses to sources they have read. From the courses held so far, and from the positive feedback given, most students agree that while the procedure involved in writing the paper is demanding and time consuming, it has helped them develop their own critical skills and has helped them prepare for the requirements of their future studies – particularly in coping with the requirements of writing the literature review of their dissertation proposals.

There are, however, considerations that need to be taken into account when thinking about how to develop these skills. Coming from very diverse cultural and educational backgrounds the problems encountered may vary from student to student. One problem that seems to be common, especially in the early stages of writing the paper, is being able to take a position and clearly identify the other positions available. Often this has been due to lack of understanding of how to refine the topic under discussion more precisely and/or not being able to identify how the sources they have read fit in with the specific aspect of the topic the paper will focus on. Again, due to lack of relevant experience, or adoption of methods from previous educational practice, there is also a reluctance to reject a source that initially was thought to be useful and that may have consumed a lot of the student's time and energy. These problems can be dealt with through the process of writing the paper, the continual development of the annotated bibliography and refinement of the research aims. However, these techniques should not be seen in isolation or viewed as some kind of remedy to the highlighted problems. Developing the critical thinking, reading and writing skills of students needs to be addressed from the very start of their studies. The course described in this paper is only one in a sequence of courses at CERGE; we begin with summarization skills followed by critically analyzing a single text before even asking students to provide credible and constructive opinion on several papers on the same topic. The skills need to be widened, refined, and reviewed throughout the sequence of courses taken by the students. Without this revision and constant practice many would have difficulty in developing the critical skills required to be a successful graduate student.

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Appendix One – Sample Course Outline

Academic Writing Two: Writing a Position Paper

(Based on the course outline for spring 2008)

Week/Dates	INPUT DESCRIPTION	ASSIGNMENTS/DEADLINES
Two Jan 14–18	Course Introduction/Requirements	Paragraph description of Position Paper (PP) idea
Three Jan 21–25	Critical Thinking Critical Reading	
Four Jan 28 –Feb 1	Annotated Bibliography Consultations on PP proposals	Mon 28/1 Submit paragraph description of PP idea. Assign: Annotated Bibliography (AB) of three sources
Five Feb 4–8	Comparisons	Comparative Analysis of sources on initial AB
Six Feb 11–15	Citation Techniques Qualifications	Mon 11/2 Submission of initial AB
Seven Feb 18–22 Mid Terms	Consultations on ABs and Comparisons	Mon 18/2 Submission of Comparative Analysis
Eight Feb 25–29	Argumentation Feedback Reports	
Nine March 3–7		Mon 3/3: First draft of PP with updated AB to instructor and colleagues Assign: Feedback Reports on colleagues' first drafts of PP
Ten March 10–14	Paired Tutorials with Instructor on Feedback Reports and First Draft of Position Paper	Mon 10/3: Feedback Reports to colleagues and instructor
Eleven March 17–21	Individual Consultations with Instructor on First Draft of Position Paper Introductions/Conclusions/Abstract Writing	
Twelve March 24–28 Mon Holiday		Tues 25/3: Second draft of PP with updated AB to colleagues and instructor. Assign: Prepare feedback on second draft of colleagues' PP
Thirteen March 31–April 5	Paired Tutorials with Instructor on Feedback on Second Draft of Position Paper	
Fourteen April 7–11	Consultations with Instructor on Second Draft of Position Paper	
Fifteen April 14–18		Wed 16/4: Final Draft deadline