

Teaching writing: An Analysis of the Writing Tasks Used at East West University in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the writing tasks used at East West University in Bangladesh. At the outset, what is presented here is a general introduction to what writing means, components of writing, and the different stages that writing involves. Pointing out to the needs of teaching academic writing to university graduates, the common writing tasks required at university level are listed. After a thorough analysis of the writing tasks used at East West University, techniques devised by Raimes are suggested (1983) for task modification. Finally, a conclusion is drawn emphasizing teacher's role and task appropriation in writing instruction.

What is Writing?

Writing, broadly put, is a cultural invention which has at least two dimensions: at one level, writing is simply a system of storing knowledge information for future references and retrieval. On the second dimension, writing appears to be a thinking process or a tool for thinking. If one focuses on the first dimension, then writing is a technology, a human invention that enables us to record our thoughts setting us apart from other animals. It is a technology using which an individual or a group of humans pass on knowledge to another individual or a group living at different realms of time and space. Simply put, at one level, writing is a powerful technology of storing, sharing, and retrieving knowledge information codified in linguistic codes.

On the other hand, if one considers the second dimension, then writing is a thought processes during which words are put together to convey one's ideas and emotions. Thoughts unless uttered or written down, do not have a physical and real existence and thus do not make a coherent and holistic sense even to the thinker himself. In order to appeal to one's understanding, thoughts need to make their impression on our senses by creating an image of the real world through the use of graphics and letters. Once shapeless thoughts are extracted from our mind, these can be observed and reacted upon, that is, either the thoughts are accepted as they are or they may be taken to be built upon, to be pondered ponder over, or to be judged for their effects in achieving a communicational goal.

Again writing is done not merely by putting graphic symbols onto paper. The symbols have to be put together using accepted conventions of a linguistic community. According to Byrne (1979) "writing is clearly much more than production of graphical symbols" (Byrne,

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1979, p.1). When arranged according to certain conventions, these graphical symbols form words which in turn make sentences (following grammar rules). Byrne adds that “writing involves encoding of message of some kind through which the writer translates his/her thoughts into language” (*ibid*: p.1). It is this strong connection between writing and thinking that makes writing a very important component of language learning programs.

Components of Writing

Written expression draws upon a number of underlying components. These building blocks of written languages are often interrelated. Raimes (1983) shows an array of these components that a writer must deal with in order to produce a good piece of writing:

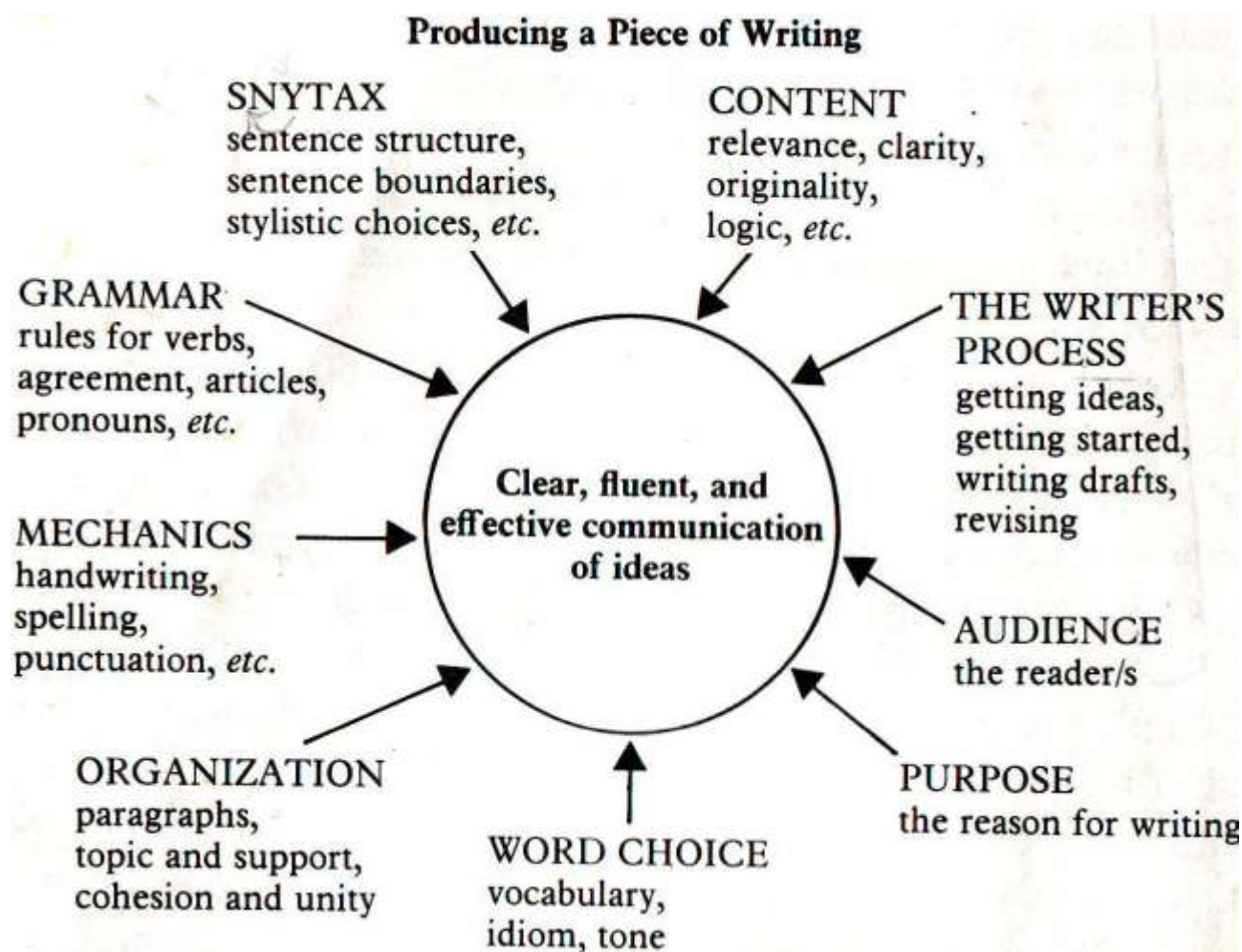


Fig 1. Producing a piece of writing (Raimes 1983, p. 6)

Similarly, White (1995) views writing as an activity “involving a number of thinking processes which are drawn upon in varied and complex ways as an individual composes, transcribes, evaluates, and revises.” (White, 1995: p. v)

Writing is very much a thought process in itself as it is a medium of communicating our thoughts to ourselves and to others. It is a mode in which inner thoughts are developed. We write to explore what is lying in our mind and in this way it is not simply directly putting down ready-made thoughts on paper rather it is developing a stream of thoughts on paper or screen. Most writers do not end up with the exact amount of thoughts initially conceived. Chances are, it is just a germ, a spark of thought springing up in mind and later getting nourishment on paper or on computer screen which leads to its blossoming. Therefore, in my opinion, writing is the act of conceiving ideas, developing it, modifying it, altering it till one is finally satisfied with the final product.

The invention of writing influences the ways we learn and has impacted our cognitive world immensely. Pennington (2000) observes:

Writing has evolved as a system for recording language in its externalized form, as speech, and in its internalized form, as ideas. In the later capacity, it has no doubt helped to promote the (at least partly independent) development of the cognitive side of the language-and indeed, our cognitive abilities more generally-by making possible complex instructions of ideas built on a mountain or chain of “captured” thoughts, which, when written down, can be increasingly probed and built upon.... Writing became a means of capturing our thoughts, and the thoughts of others, of storing them and holding them constant for later reflection, contemplation and development. In this way, writing made it possible to greatly expand our ability to process our own thoughts and the thoughts of others. That is, writing expanded our cognitive worlds and our ability to create new cognitive worlds. (Quoted in Pennington, 2004, p 69)

Irmscher’s (1979) description of writing can be summed up as a special kind of mental process, and a mode of learning in itself. However, the process of writing goes beyond mere production of words, sentences and paragraph and it necessarily involves various processes like thinking, planning, writing, reading, rewriting, revising and editing. In fact, “it is a complex process with a number of operations going on simultaneously” (Hedge, 1988, p. 19). In other words, the complexity of writing lies in the fact that these activities do not always happen in a series; instead they take place recursively and randomly.

Meaning is another central element common to the definition of writing. For example, Murray (1978) defines writing as “the process of writing language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate it.” Zamel (1983) describes the composing process as a “non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas when they attempt to approximate meaning.” (Cited in Hyland, 2003: 11)

Stages/Processes of Writing

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The process of writing comprises a number of stages which Hedge (1988) represents in the following way:

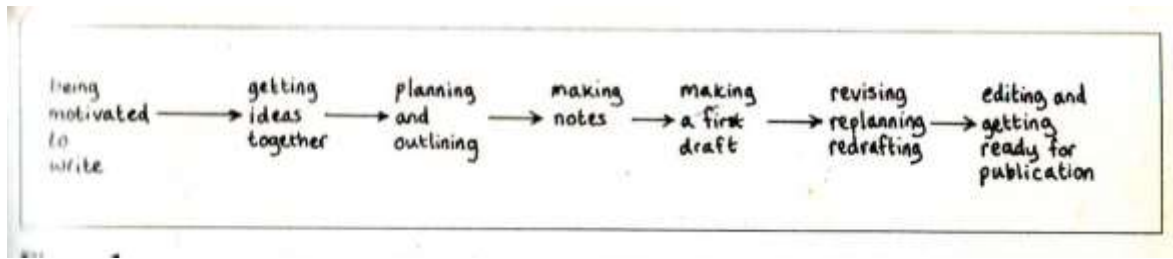


Fig 2. The process of writing (Hedge 1988 p. 21)

The process of writing is extremely messy at the beginning which eventually results in clarity. The following illustration by Smith (in Hedge 1988, p. 21) shows the different messy stages of the production of a composition:

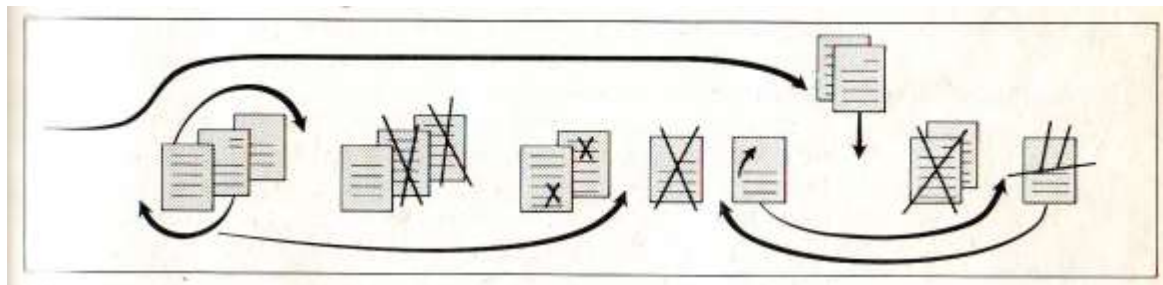


Fig 3. Messy stages of writing (from Hedge 1988 p. 21)

Typically, this messy process of writing has been characterized by three main stages: pre-writing or planning, writing and re-writing/revisioning and editing (Hedge 1988, Peacock 1986). Peacock (1986) uses the terms composing, transcribing, and revising for these three interdependent stages of writing. All these three stages combine together and form the writing process that leads to communication of ideas. In the composing stages, writers execute their planning and take up the content of the message to be communicated. They decide on the appropriate grammatical structures and words to communicate those ideas. The transcribing stage is the production stage in which graphic symbols are put together following the orthographic conventions. The editing and improving the clarity of the messages to be expressed is done in the revising stage. Hedge (1988) explains these stages in more details:

Pre-writing or planning:

The purpose of writing and the audience for a piece of writing are very crucial at the planning stage as purpose and target audience influence one’s choice of language to be used, that is, the purpose and audience for writing guide the writer “to select what to say and how to present it in the most appropriate style-formal, friendly, serious, or tentative” (p. 22). The

amount of pre-writing or planning varies according to the task at hand e.g. an email to a very close friend is very spontaneous whereas an academic paper is highly planned.

Writing and re-writing/revisoning:

For an efficient writer, this stage typically involves writing down the ideas first without focusing too much on spelling, grammar, and punctuation, that is, the main focus at this stage is on the content or the subject matter of the intended piece of writing. In between planning and writing is the intervening stage, the rewriting/revisoning stage. Revisoning happens at the level of vocabulary, rearranging sentences and patterns, clarifying thoughts and links between them, omitting repeated ideas, filling gaps between ideas expressed and so on. Writing, also known as drafting, focuses on *what* to say whereas re-writing or redrafting focuses on *how* to say it effectively.

Editing:

Editing is a process of final readjustment of the text and correction of the linguistic flaws in the text to ensure maximum accessibility to the reader. Poor writers edit their writing from the very beginning of the composition and they solely concentrate on grammar, punctuation, spelling- the lower order accuracy at the cost of the overall organizational quality. They are not aware of the fact that leaving their writing for later re-thinking and reorganizing is essential to producing quality writing.

Writing is generally considered a difficult activity since it involves a great deal of thinking, planning, drafting and revising before producing a finished text. This apparent complexity of writing makes it interesting to investigate its unique nature among the other language skills. In the following section we will look at the nature of writing and compare it with speech.

Common Writing tasks at the University

The Educational Testing Service conducted the most comprehensive study of academic writing tasks (Hate et. al., 1996, cited in Hinkel 2004) across the Universities in the United States of America and found that the typical academic essays at universities are of 5 to 10 or more than 10 pages length. Assignments of this length are more common in humanities than in science and engineering and involve library research and information from a variety of sources. Essays of medium length (1 to 5 pages) are common in almost all departments except for physics, mathematics and engineering. These assignments include library research reports, laboratory or experiment reports and book reviews. Short writing tasks (0.5 to 1.5 pages) include lab reports, case studies, annotations of literature etc. summaries and free writing tasks, journal entries, notes on personal thoughts and experiences are found to be exclusively used in English composition tasks courses.

Basing on Hate et. al. (1996) survey, Hinkel (2004) lists the most common types of rhetorical formats found in-class and out-of-class writing assignments at undergraduate level:

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- **Exposition** (short tasks required largely in introductions and explanations of material or content to follow, and thus it is a component of all assignment types)
- **Cause-effect interpretation** (by far the most prevalent writing task, found in over half of all writing assignments)
- **Classification** of events, facts, and developments according to a generalized theoretical or factual scheme
- **Comparison/contrast** of entities, theories, methods, analyses, and approaches (in short assignments)
- **Analysis** of information/facts (in medium -length assignments)
- **Argumentation** based on facts/research/published literature (in medium length assignments)

Types of writing assignments (in declining order of frequency) (from Hinkel 2004, p. 27)

Relatively less common rhetorical formats found are expanded definition, process analysis, and fact based exemplification. Narration and description were not found in any assignment.

Hinkel also found that the most crucial sub skill of writing to be successful in the academy is discourse and information organization , the next important ones being the command of standard written English (grammar, phrasing, and sentence structure), and vocabulary. Apart from these textual demands in writing, almost all writing assignments at university level appear to be challenging to ESL learners as it is often found that these assignments demand a number of different writing tasks.

... particularly all writing assignments necessitate more than one writing task, such as exposition in the introduction, followed by cause/effect or comparison/contrast rhetorical structures, and possibly back to exposition in the conclusion. For instance, most types of writing assignments can include summaries of published works or synthesis of multiple sources of information or data. In this case, the writing task would include synthesis (or analysis) of information, paraphrasing, and restatement skills. (p. 18)

Techniques of Teaching Academic Writing in EFL/ESL Context

Jordan (1997) points out an array of approaches to teaching academic writing. For example, he cites a number of books on genre approach to teaching academic writing: Neissberg and Buker (1990), Dudeley –Evans (1985), Clanchy and Ballard(1992). These books contain common language functions in academic writing such as description, narration, instruction, explanation, definition, classification, exemplification, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, discussion and argumentation etc.

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Jordan argues that these books follow product oriented approaches to teaching writing which during 1980s, were criticized on the ground that the use of model text and parallel writing prescribed in this approach put limitations on learners' ability to write freely. On the other end of the continuum is process approach which is concerned with the mental processes involved in writing. A process approach 'puts meaning to the fore rather than form' (p 167) and is learner centered. According to White and Arndt (1991, cited in Jordan 1997), a process-focused approach to writing is an enabling approach... the goal of this approach is to nurture the skills with which writers work out their own solution to the problem they set themselves, with which they shape their raw material into a coherent message, and with which they work towards an acceptable and appropriate form for expressing it.

Writing instructions in books following the process approach are arranged according to the sequences and stages of writing: preliminary ideas, prewriting activities, the outline, getting started, the first paragraph, the first draft, revising, editing, proofreading, further draft etc. Jordan cites White and McGovern (1994) as an example of such books. Typical writing tasks in this book have the following stages:

- Discussion
- Brainstorming
- Self-evaluation
- Planning
- Peer evaluation
- Writing the first draft
- Self-evaluation
- Peer evaluation
- Revision/rewriting
- Writing the second draft
- Teacher evaluation and marking

Problems with Teaching Writing in Bangladesh

It will probably not be an overstatement to say that teaching of writing is non-existent in most Bangladeshi schools: both in case of Bangla and English. Almost all teachers at school level lack minimum proficiency in English and do not have personal experience in composing in English or even in Bangla. English knowledge for most teachers is knowledge of constructing grammatically correct isolated single sentences and translating fixed expressions from Bangla to English or From English to Bangla.

Teaching of writing in the USA and in the UK has long back shifted its attention from dealing with finished product of writing to the processes of writing (Tyson, 1998). Unfortunately, in Bangladesh the shift hasn't happened yet even at the university writing courses. At university level, teaching reading and writing is mainly done in lecture mode that is without enough engagement with the text being read and written. Traditional view of teaching has left very less space for manipulating text knowledge and producing a text.

Most learners studying in private universities come from a sound socio-economic background. Though we do not have empirical studies to substantiate our claim, we assume from personal experience and from informal talks with learners that almost all of them took tuitions for English. Yet, they lack the minimum proficiency in writing. When, English foundation courses in private universities want students not only to acquire the language but also to be efficient in performing the academic functions in that language, majority of the learners can reproduce only memorized chunks and place them according to the demands and topics of a writing task. As mentioned previously the amount of ‘writing’ that actually takes place in schools is very rare. Memorizing selective paragraphs, essays, précis, application, and letters is very common in schools and intermediate colleges in Bangladeshi rural and suburban districts. When at school learners independent thinking has never been nurtured or encouraged, university values critical thinking and creativity in the writing of the undergraduate students.

Students entering universities use English for all academic and administrative purposes. English is required to listen to lectures, to ask questions in the classroom, to discuss during counseling in English, and to make formal presentations in English. These contexts of academic activities are mainly spoken. It is often seen that enthusiastic students discussing their problems and personal interests with the teachers. However, students hardly come for discussing their writing.

Analyzing the Writing Tasks at East West University

East West University was established by a non-profit, non-political, charitable organization called Progoti Foundation for Education and Development in 1996 under The Private University Act (Act 34) of 1992 of Bangladesh Government. In 1996, the university started with 6 faculty members and 20 students and today the university has approximately 187 faculty members and 5000 students enrolled in various undergraduate and post graduate courses offered by the university such as Business Studies, Pharmacy, Engineering, Economics, and English. The university is one of the best performing universities in Bangladesh and is administered by its Board of Directors. The mission statement of the university claims

1. to provide, at a reasonable cost, tertiary education characterized by academic excellence in a range of subjects that are particularly relevant to current and anticipated societal needs.
2. to provide students with opportunities, resources and expertise to achieve academic, personal and career goals within a stimulating and supportive environment.
3. to maintain high quality in both instruction and research as well as to render community service through dissemination of information, organization of training programs and other activities.
4. to provide a humane, responsive and invigorating atmosphere for productive learning and innovative thinking.

The university offers three service courses compulsory for every undergraduate student across disciplines. In addition to these courses a remedial course is offered to students with poor English proficiency. Student placement in a remedial course is determined by their performance in the admission test. Following is a brief description of these service courses taken from the course outline:

1. Remedial course (Eng 099)

The objective of the course is to help students attain a basic proficiency in four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

2. Spoken English (Eng 100)

This course is meant to provide extensive practice in oral expression to meet students' needs for oral communication in practical life. The course will focus on both accuracy and fluency and provides practice in functional and situational English. It will train students for seminar presentations, extempore speeches, debates, and facing and taking interviews along with a number of strategies of oral communication skills.

3. Basic English (Eng 101)

The course seeks to provide training in the four basic skills of English: listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also includes contextual grammar with a learner focus. The grammatical components will be covered in an integrative and holistic way and addressed basically through reading, writing, and speaking, with meaning-focused activities.

Course Objective:

This course is primarily designed to provide the opportunity for understanding and improving communications skills especially reading and writing. Students are expected:

1. To become informed readers and critics of any text in English.
2. To gain an understanding of the underlying principles of effective writing styles.
3. To develop strategies for writing paragraphs. These strategies will include generating ideas, organizing thoughts in a paragraph, rewriting and proofreading.
4. To demonstrate an ability to prepare and deliver effective spoken responses.
5. To improve skills in critical listening and thinking.
(as stated in the course outline).

4. Composition and communication skills (Eng 102)

The course stresses on developing writing skills. The components of the course are writing reports, essays of different types (mainly expository, argumentative, narrative, and descriptive) formal letters (letters in academic settings, job applications, CVs), summary writing, and writing assignments, term/research papers with bibliography, footnotes and index. It also stresses on correction of spelling, grammar and usage.

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Course Objective:

This course is designed to give students scope to practice English and communication skills vital for people who need to use the language in their professional lives. In doing so, the course will enable students:

1. To become an informed consumer and critic of any text written in English.
2. To gain an understanding of the underlying principles of effective writing styles.
3. To gain an understanding of the importance of the organization techniques of writing adapting to a variety of audiences and occasions.
4. To demonstrate an ability to prepare and deliver effective written responses.
5. To improve skills in critical reading and thinking.
(as stated in the course outline)

An analysis of all the components dealing with writing in two midterm exams and the semester final exam shows the following tasks that required controlled and free writing:

- a. Fill in the blanks for testing vocabulary and discrete grammar item such as tense, article, voice etc. (Eng 099, Eng 101)
- b. Correcting errors at paragraph level (Eng 099, Eng 101, and Eng 102)
- c. Completing incomplete sentences (Eng 099)
- d. Joining sentences (in Eng 099, Eng 101)
- e. Making sentences with words provided (Eng 099, Eng 101)
- f. Short questions based on reading comprehension passage (in Eng 099, Eng 101)
- g. Summary writing(in Eng 101)
- h. Paragraph writing(in Eng 099, Eng 101)
- i. Essay writing (Eng 102)
- j. Research paper (in Eng 102)

We will analyze these tasks against the evaluation criteria Hedge has proposed and finally take examples from published materials on writing tasks that are potentially effective in promoting learning.

The writing tasks listed above fall into three broad categories: controlled, text based guided writing and free writing.

Controlled Composition:

In a controlled composition exercise students are usually provided a text to work with so that they do not have to deal with content and ideas, organization and sentence structure. Most controlled writing exercises focuses on a single item at a time and requires minimal changes in the text at the level of grammar and syntax level. These changes may include number, tenses, reported/reporting speech, active/passive voice, relative clause and post nominal clause and so on. Students are not asked to add any new idea or content element of their own. Controlled writing tasks are thought to have several advantages:

Controlled composition focuses the students' attention on specific features of the written language. It is a good method of reinforcing grammar, vocabulary and syntax in context. In addition as the students write the passages, they are using the conventions of written English, such as indentation, punctuation, connecting words, and spelling. (Raimes 1983, p. 97)

It seems that the English foundation courses at EWU are overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the advantages of controlled writing tasks as perceived by Raimes. However, an analysis of the writing tasks in the subsequent section shows a number of demerits of the purely controlled writing tasks.

Following are some of the controlled writing tasks used in Eng 099 and Eng 101 courses:

Task type 1: Fill in the blanks:

Fill in the blanks using appropriate words provided in the box. (You may need to change the form of the words): (0.5X10=5)

<i>Chopped</i>	<i>Between</i>	<i>quick</i>	<i>late</i>	<i>that</i>
<i>Call</i>	<i>Large</i>	<i>make</i>	<i>bring</i>	<i>part</i>

In the German States (1) ----- nineteenth century, immigrants to the United States (2) ----- the custom of eating (3) ----- meat steak. By the early (4) ----- of this century, Americans were eating hamburger steaks (5) ----- slices of bread and were (6) ----- the sandwich a 'hamburger'. The sandwich (7) ----- spread throughout the United States in the 1930s and after, many small American restaurants advertised 'the best hamburger in town', but it was (8) ----- companies such as White Castle, McDonalds, Burger King, and Wendy's in the United States and Wimpy's in England (9) ----- made the hamburger a standard kind of fast food all over the United States and, recently, the world. Hamburgers (10) ----- by US companies are now sold in Venezuela, China, Japan, and Moscow.

Insert articles where necessary. Put a cross (X) in the blank if no article is needed: (.5X5=2.5)
I am (1) ---- foreigner teaching Arts to 'O' and 'A' level students in (2) ----- English medium school in (3) ----- Uttara. I like (4) --- ---- magnificent school building and I like my students too. They are not very good in (5) --- ---- English but very enthusiastic about learning it.

Put the verbs in bracket in their correct tense: (.5X5=2.5)

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An Arab prince had (1) (hear) that in a certain town there was a judge who (2) (be) very clever in discovering the truth. The prince (3) (wish) to test the ability of the judge personally, and so he (4) (disguise) himself as a merchant and (5) (set) out for the town on his horse.

Task type 2: Correcting errors at paragraph level:

Find out the verbs that are not in agreement with their subjects and correct them. Underline your corrections: (2.5)

All around the world, there is international students at institutions of higher learning. The definition of an international student is "a postsecondary student from another country." The meaning of post secondary is "after high school." Another phrase for international student are "foreign students." The word foreign mean "of a different country or culture." Even so, some people doesn't like the word foreign, so they uses the phrase "international students."

Task type 3: Completing incomplete sentences:

Complete the following sentences meaningfully: (.5x5=2.5)

- (a) He loved it.....
- (b)to get a good grade?
- (c) The prince wished to.....
- (d) Have you ever.....
- (e) He always.....

Task type 4: Joining sentences:

Join the following sentences/ combine each group of sentences to make a meaningful sentence:

- a. Hippies were young people. They were mainly from the well-to-do middle classes. They rebelled against society in the sixties and early seventies.
- b. Winston Churchill was the famous leader of England during the Second World War. He worked late at night. He also often took naps during the day.
- c. Networking is a process of expanding communication all over the world. It is a process of expanding interaction all over the world. This process is done by connecting many computers.
- d. Last summer he went to his village. He went there to spend his holidays. He stayed there with his uncle. His uncle is a doctor.
- e. He made a brilliant result. He heard the news. He was delighted.

However, these tasks apparently involve minimal student engagement; writing tasks such as change the verbs which are not in agreement with their subject or use the appropriate tense/article are very mechanical in nature and therefore does not engage learners creative muscle. The tasks are purely product oriented and no particular form or function of writing is aimed in these exercises. Task motivation is totally absent as learners can hardly link these to their experience. There has not been enough support given to the learners either in the form of a model or an example of a solved question. No particular context is provided in which the task is likely to appear. The teacher is the only audience and classroom interaction is kept to bare minimum. Though grammar teaching, the aim of these exercises, might be useful, contextualizing the tasks will be more fruitful to ESL learners than these discrete point grammar tasks.

Conclusion

Integrating texts and information from various sources is a highly complex process that involves sub processes like reading, understanding, critiquing, linking ideas and information from other sources and so on. There are learning steps involved in composing academic text-summarizing ideas, expanding them, imitating the academic style and the final synthesis of the ideas and information from background reading. I strongly believe that incorporating these sub skills into academic writing develops over time. So initially, university students need to learn summarizing a single text. EFL learners' reading ability seriously affects the quality of summaries as found in the students' summary writing. They simply locate the topic sentences from different paragraphs of a text and put them together without caring for coherence. This is particularly true when students work with expository text. Summarizing expository text is difficult at this level and I think, summarizing narratives and stories will be more encouraging and will produce more confidence in students. Composition instruction for academic writing in EFL situation must realize that the quality of summarizing, paraphrasing, original explanation improve with enhanced language proficiency and repeated practice.

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