
Discovery Writing: ESL Student Research with a Purpose

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Research is a word that sometimes strikes terror in the hearts of ESL students, who visualize hours of combing library stacks for information to copy. Teachers, too, often dread the thought of student research, foreseeing endless hours reading and grading sometimes unimaginative and often plagiarized papers. But ESL student research doesn't need to be dull. When students are given the opportunity to uncover and process information they want to know, work in collaborative teams, and publish their findings, real learning occurs and research becomes a friendlier word.

Engaging Students in Research

For students to learn, "engagement" must take place; students must see themselves as "doers or owners" of knowledge that will "somehow further the purposes of their lives" (Cambourne, 1988, p. 52). This is especially true for writing and researching. Too often writing instruction focuses on skills and isolated activities for which students may perceive no authentic purpose (Popken, 1988). An emphasis on decontextualized language skills ignores the fact that college students use reading and writing to learn; reading and writing skills are not automatically transferred to subject matter learning (Vacca & Vacca, 1993). Research, too, often focuses on analyzing and reformulating irrelevant data, a task which invites limited personal engagement (Langer & Applebee, 1987). Studies suggest that writing must be relevant to students if they are to learn from the process (Freeman & Freeman, 1989; Fox, 1990; Zamel, 1982).

Students who plan to continue their academic careers beyond the ESL classroom will not only need to know how to conduct and report research in their various disciplines, such as business, science, and humanities, but will also need to read and analyze research-based text. These skills form the foundation of American higher education. Students who are not adept at gathering and reporting research data are at a grave disadvantage in the academic setting, not to mention their future careers.

Researchers also claim that learning to work in cooperative teams can benefit students in their academic pursuits (Johnson & Johnson, 1984). American universities, influenced by the use of cooperative management models in the business community, are increasingly turning to small group interaction as a means of preparation for life beyond the university. By giving students tasks to accomplish in groups, teachers convey the message that teamwork matters. Students perceive that they can reach their learning goals "if and only if the other students in the learning

group also reach their goals" (Johnson & Johnson, 1984, p. 27). Teachers and students alike have begun to recognize that cooperative teamwork supports both individual and group learning.

Research becomes more powerful for students when the results not only have meaning but also reach a broad audience through classroom publishing. A number of studies cite the value of publishing student work, claiming that it enhances motivation, communication, and collaboration (Burnham, 1986; Osterhauadt & Wilking, 1992; Willensky & Green, 1990; Witt, 1991) as well as focuses "meaningful attention on writing conventions such as grammar, punctuation and spelling" (Brown, 1989, p. 19). Another study, examining ESL students' perspective of publishing, illustrated that students valued their writing more when it was published (Moulton & Holmes, in press).

Assigning the Project

Using a communicative approach which utilizes original student research, teamwork, and publication, we have devised a strategy which integrates skills and provides a real purpose and real readers for student writing. Each semester, we engage our intermediate and advanced writing students in research projects we call discovery writing. These practical projects involve students in research by sending them out into the community to find information they are already curious about, write it up, and publish it for public consumption.

To begin a discovery project, we spend class time generating topics that students need or want to know more about. Some recent topics our classes decided to research were apartments in the local area, restaurants affordable on a student budget, American holidays, stores that sell "cool" clothes at bargain prices, and entertainment hot spots. Depending on the topics, a class either works in two- or three-person teams on separate topics or divides a topic into manageable pieces. Teams are then formed based on each student's specific interests. For example, in the holiday research project, the instructor matched two students according to holiday preferences while in the apartment research project, students selected their own three-person teams and then chose geographic areas to explore.

Once the teams and topics are decided, students figure out what specific data to look for and then begin to compile their research questionnaires. Queries may include anything from prices, to types of services or merchandise available, to customer opinion. Any question is fair game, but if the answers are to be integrated into a single document, the questions must be consistent across the groups. This activity requires students not only to think about what questions will elicit the information they are seeking but also to formulate questions with linguistic accuracy. We use this process as a diagnostic tool to check for individual understanding of question patterns and as a sensitizing session on the notion of social register.

Students next discuss possible sources of the data they need: newspapers, people, yellow pages, public offices, businesses, and other alternatives to standard library resources. Students not familiar with American culture are often surprised with the availability of information and the ease with which it may be obtained. They decide on the number and nature of sources and then divide up the tasks so that no one's effort is duplicated and the work is divided fairly. This promotes individual accountability as well as group responsibility.

Armed with their questions, students pursue their sources, collecting the information needed to write their manuscripts. They conduct interviews with key informants; read brochures, newspapers, and public documents; and take field notes as they infiltrate the community, searching for answers. For example, the source of information for the restaurant project included menus and a visual inspection of the properties while the "cool" clothes project used newspaper ads and yellow pages as well as trips to local stores.

With data in hand, the teams reconvene. They begin the task of making sense out of the information they have collected. Critical thinking skills are used to analyze and classify the data logically. Because not all the data always fits nor do people always interpret information in the same way, students must negotiate and make group decisions on which information to include. This process involves a number of functional listening and speaking tasks such as critical listening, asking for clarification, agreeing/disagreeing, and persuading.

When data analysis is complete, we bring in samples of possible formats—brochures, guides, manuals, even computer databases—to try to expand the students' publishing options. Visual conceptualization skills are called on as students then select and design a format for presentation, trying to make it as consumer friendly as possible. Students begin to realize that while the process of discovery is important, so is the product (Byrne, 1988).

Once the format is established, students, still in their original teams, write their findings. Some groups choose to write cooperatively while others choose to assign sections. Most writing is done outside the classroom, but we usually oversee the final editing process in class to assist groups with language use and style.

The next step is publishing. Depending on the tools available, students either type, word process, or enter the information into a database to get their document ready to go to press (which often means the office copier). Since the information contained in the document is useful to other ESL students, a distribution network is set up. Copies are placed in the hands of students, on a shelf of the library, at the counter of the international student office, and in the language lab where they can be easily accessed. Often we accompany this event with a celebration and an opportunity for students to congratulate themselves. With an air of festivity,

students sign each others' copies, share refreshments, and generally bask in the pride of authorship.

Evaluating the assignment is simple because we have the students evaluate themselves and each other. We distribute a form on which they evaluate themselves and their group (see Appendix). Rarely do students inflate their own grades; in fact, we have found that students tend to underestimate their achievements. Based on their evaluations, we then assign three grades: one for group cooperation, one for individual contribution, and one for final product.

In Retrospect

Aside from the multiple language skills the project integrates, discovery writing has also had several affective benefits for our students. Because it is a student-generated and student-centered activity, learners become engaged in the assignment. Students take ownership not only of the project but also of their learning. Because students work so closely together, they tend to develop a strong rapport, benefiting from an environment in which they feel comfort and a sense of membership (Gardner, 1985; Johnson, 1989). Risk-taking becomes easier, so students are more willing to try out their "newly acquired language, to use it for meaningful purposes, and to assert themselves" (Brown, 1994, p. 24).

Discovery writing has given our students an authentic purpose and audience for writing. It has provided an opportunity to integrate speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. It has introduced our students to the critical thinking process and taught them how to learn from inquiry. And it has created a community of researchers and writers bonded by team spirit and pride of authorship.

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Appendix A

Self-Evaluation

Please evaluate yourself and your team by responding to the following:

Individual work

Rate your personal contribution to

circle one

- | | | | | |
|---|-----------|------|---------|-------------|
| 1. the planning of your group's project | very good | good | average | not so good |
| 2. collecting data for the project | very good | good | average | not so good |
| 3. interpreting and analyzing data | very good | good | average | not so good |
| 4. writing up the results | very good | good | average | not so good |
| Give yourself a final project grade | very good | good | average | not so good |

Group work

Rate your group on

circle one

- | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|------|---------|-------------|
| 1. cooperation during planning | very good | good | average | not so good |
| 2. cooperation during data collection | very good | good | average | not so good |
| 3. cooperation during data analysis | very good | good | average | not so good |
| 4. cooperation during writing | very good | good | average | not so good |
| Give your group a final project grade | very good | good | average | not so good |

Project

Rate your final product

circle one

- | | | | |
|-----------|------|---------|-------------|
| very good | good | average | not so good |
|-----------|------|---------|-------------|

On another piece of paper, write brief answers to the following:

1. What did you learn from this project? How?
2. What did you like best about this project? Why?
3. What did you like least about this project? Why?
4. What suggestions do you have for improving the project if we were to do it again? Why? How?