

Teaching Idea 23

Seminar Concept

“Reading and Writing for Academic Purposes” - A Language Course for Undergraduates

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1) Seminar Description: *Reading and Writing Culture*

Since the seminar aims to teach both reading and writing for academic purposes, the most fundamental aspect of my seminar concept is to teach both elements of the course in such a way that they complement each other, and that students learn that **the skill of academic writing is inextricably intertwined with academic reading**. Hence, the first and foremost feature of my teaching concept is to teach academic reading as vital to learning and improving academic writing. At the same time, academic writing covers topics that are already discussed in academic reading, namely how cultures communicate with each other, how the West encounters non-Western cultural norms and vice-versa and what role gender plays in the cultural sphere. Such an approach to cultural overlapping and difference as well as gender and culture in teaching an advanced language course further gives impetus to my research on moving cultures in my post-doc project.

2) Teaching Methods and Goals

Since I consider culture with reference to cultural difference and encounter, gender and social expectations in Western and Eastern societies as the most crucial themes in my teaching, I select texts that deal with these issues from a variety of perspectives. My major goal in the seminar is to teach language not only to obtain proficiency, but also as a tool to comprehend present-day cultural transactions in the global world. Thus, the reading materials in my course foster not only a broad awareness of cultural disparities and overlapping, but also introduce innovative ways of **interpreting culture in one’s own academic writing**. To meet this goal, I set an academic text as an out-of-class task on a weekly basis and discuss it by dividing the

class into small groups; each group exchanges their views on the texts and then one person reports back before the final discussion of the text collectively. Such a method of discussing texts in small groups not only develops **speaking, vocabulary, negotiating and presenting skills in English**, but also inculcates **creativity** and **critical thinking**, which are the major objectives in all my courses at the University of Giessen. Lastly, I also ask students to create **questions** about the texts themselves instead of only answering the ones set. A question-answer method is, indeed, integral to my teaching concept, for it helps students to follow the line of argumentation in a complex text critically.

How to Cope with the Challenge of Academic Writing with Reference to Academic Reading:

Teaching academic writing in relation to academic reading is a daunting task, especially as most students are used to writing the way they speak. To start off academic writing, I first make students pay attention to the **writer’s tone (or register)** in academic texts as part of their weekly homework. As a warmup exercise, students see a text on a power-point presentation and point out where the text is colloquial and where it is formal. Then they are asked to replace the colloquial passages with the more formal ones in pairs. Such a method introduces students to the most essential goal of academic writing, namely developing the ability to **write in a formal context**, first recognizing and then using the right vocabulary and collocation. Also, I address a list of common errors that I have gleaned from student essays in the last years on a weekly basis in my power-point presentation called “Error Terror,” which most students find useful as well as entertaining.

Once it is clear that the tone has to be formal in writing academic texts, the next step is to teach and practise **words and phrases** employed in different kinds of academic texts, particularly short and long research or term paper. To achieve this target, students are asked to consult the shorter version of the [Manchester Phrasebank](#) online, which offers a wide range of academic phrases and collocations, useful in writing academic/ research papers along with an online link on [Hedging](#), namely using cautious style with the helping of specific words and phrases. These two online links are particularly useful in citing outside sources in the essay elegantly.

Creating and Maintaining a “Personal Mini Dictionary”:

In order to further equip students with **enriched academic language and vocabulary** on a weekly basis, I motivate them to develop **sensitivity to language patterns** in order to enhance the skill of imitating good style and expression. I tend to remind them that skillful writing is an outcome of skillful reading. Those who wish to be successful writers have to engage more intensively with the reading assignments. To meet this objective, I make my students create a separate notebook as their “Personal Mini Dictionary” in which they are supposed to note down new words occurring in a reading assignment. With an exception of a few, a large majority proudly demonstrates the use of newly learned academic phraseology in their essays.

Summarizing and Paraphrasing / Reporting on What is Read:

As summarizing and paraphrasing are employed while writing an academic text, I use this strategy in analyzing a complex and challenging reading task, too. For example, while discussing the weekly reading assignment in class, I ask one group to summarize the text, the other to paraphrase, and the third group to give their individual perspectives on the text asking questions about its more ambivalent dimensions. Thus, my idea is to make students **approach a reading assignment from different angles**, paying special attention to the main ideas and content as well as the writer’s tone and vocabulary. This method, indeed, encourages students to delve deeper into the texts they have read by finding out about the major themes, complex line of argumentation and new items of vocabulary, all of which are conducive to polishing academic writing skills.

Strengths and Weaknesses of an Academic Text:

As students learn to **interrogate and examine a writer’s point of view**, they are able to think more **critically about their own line of thoughts** and in spotting flaws in reasoning more efficiently. Such a method is very useful in training students to become good readers and writers. My seminar concept lays a great deal of emphasis on critical thinking, for I tend to tell my students that “Thinking is hard work”, so the attendees need to think clearly and logically first in order to become both independent readers and writers of academic texts.

Academic Writing Skills with a Focus on Sentence Structure:

Finally, the two most important components of academic writing are thoroughly practised in my class, namely 1) **structure**, including learning about a single paragraph structure as well as the 5-paragraph-long essay structure and 2) **syntax**, including style, expression and error correction. To teach these skills, students are asked to do worksheets in pairs covering

- a) how to create an essay outline following the given structure,
- b) achieve unity and coherence in each paragraph and avoid repetitions of ideas or words,
- c) use parallel structure,
- d) avoid writing choppy, run-on or stringy sentences and
- e) lastly use punctuations with a special emphasis on avoiding comma splice.

I aim to teach these skills by engaging students in a dialogue that urges them **not to be scared of making mistakes** but ‘make a lot of mistakes in order to learn from them’. Hence, creating a **comfortable classroom environment** that stimulates learning is fundamental to my seminar concept.

Creating Study Groups to Work Outside Classroom / Pair work or Group Work in Class:

I believe in interactive and task-based teaching that requires a **dialogic approach** in and outside the classroom; in short, it is an approach that involves active participation of students on different kinds of assignments together. Hence, I motivate students to practise **collective learning** as it generates ideas and makes learning more interesting.

The Lecturer as Role Model who has Learned from Errors:

Making **errors as part of the learning process** is what I highlight the most throughout the term. So, I share with my students at every stage my **own experiences and struggles as a writer** of academic papers; thus, I train them to believe in themselves and in the fact that writing is a process that requires rewriting and rethinking – a process that also involves questioning language rules and regulation before simply following them. This strategy is very helpful in making students overcome their fears and analyse language with aplomb.

3) Assessment and Learning Outcomes

It is part of my seminar concept that students are given “**Assessment Criteria**” along with the semester plan at the **beginning of the term** that outline clearly what is expected on their academic essay after having done academic reading. Hence, students are guided to learn and produce academic writing keeping in view the requirements stated in the assessment criteria.

When designing a course, I ask myself what the **learning outcomes** are expected to be and how to achieve them. To me, the success of the course lies in how far I have managed to meet the course objectives, i.e. how far I have succeeded in **involving students in doing classwork and homework actively**, and how far my **students are both successful readers and writers** of academic texts towards the end of the course.

The course attendees in this seminar have to complete three essays during the term, each of which is written in pairs or in groups and is typed and polished at home. Having finished the essay, students receive a **self-editing sheet** and do editing and proofreading in class in pencil before submitting the essay, which I read at home and give **feedback on every paragraph** in the margins. Upon returning the essay, students have to **exchange** essays with each other and give their own feedback irrespective of my comments on the essay. In this way, I create an opportunity for students not only to learn from each other, but to assess and evaluate others’ academic essays efficiently.

Since 45 minutes of class time is attributed to reading and 45 to writing, students learn to write their essays within a certain time period step by step and thus to generate texts under **time pressure**, the practice of which prepares them for the final exam. Writing different parts of the essay in class, namely introduction, body and conclusion, under my guidance help them to be attentive readers and skillful writers who are open to improving every sentence and seek help in order to achieve perfection in their writing.