VISIONS OF DIVERSITY
THROUGH THE TEACHING OF WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract
Immersed in a world of social networking, many Indonesian college students may know more about what their friends had for dinner than about events that are happening in the “real” world. They often lack curiosity, and have few opinions or interests outside their immediate needs. This seems to have been exacerbated by the likes of facebook and twitter, which encourage them to spend more time on the trite and banal rather than on reflection of the world around them. Persuading students that it is no bad thing to have a wide knowledge of the world, both within Indonesia and internationally, can be an uphill battle. Students at the Swiss German University need to be prepared for an overseas internship and a possible future working in a multicultural workplace. Through the teaching of English language writing skills as part of the syllabus on the undergraduate program, students can be exposed to many issues which they otherwise probably would not contemplate. At one level activities are to develop competency in writing skills; yet another important function is to capture student’s imagination and take them out of their comfort zone. Importantly, becoming familiar with values and behaviour typical of other cultures means the students also come closer to perceiving and understanding their own Indonesian culture and the attitudes that command their actions. This paper looks at materials and topics used to teach English language writing skills and discusses how they open a window on the world for students, moving them – at least temporarily – away from an obsession with the trivial, allowing them to see not only others, but to “see themselves as others see us”.

Keywords: developing curiosity, intercultural, attitudes, writing skills

A. Introduction
In a recent writing skills lesson at the Swiss German University, where English is the medium of instructions, students working in small groups were asked to brainstorm and then draw up an essay plan for the following topic:

| It is a bad idea for university students to have a serious romantic relationship while they are still studying. |
| Say why you support this statement giving specific reasons and any examples from your own experience. |

Most students took out paper and started discussing immediately. However, one group – where the participants were mostly male – began to protest: they did not want to
work on this topic as it was unreasonable. There was nothing wrong with being in a serious relationship while studying. The topic went against what they believed in. It was a ridiculous idea. The argument continued for a while but they could not be persuaded that to try to see something they strongly believed in from the opposite viewpoint had value. Eventually an essay plan was produced on this topic, but the prompt was ignored.

In the case above, the students’ internal critical thinking (Kay, 2012) was controlling their actions. To them the statement was counter to their own commonsense beliefs. Until there is understanding that emotions or ‘gut feeling’ is the driving force behind their reaction, they would find it difficult to change their stance. Clearly, they were unable to accept that their immediate reaction could be modified.

In fact through such activities as above, the students are required to ignore their instant reactions and put their own opinions to one side. Yet, in the world of instant text messaging and speedy answers from the internet, many students entering college education are reluctant to think independently or outside the box.

This can also be seen when an essay is set. Although the topic might be quite within their capabilities, many would rather immediately put the title into a Google Search and thus set themselves up for plagiarism with a cut and pasted essay. All without giving much thought to what and why they really think, simply because they don’t have to. They can just copy down some else’s ideas.

The task then, is how to foster in students a wide-ranging curiosity, independence and ability to think for themselves. Generally, it is fair to say that a freshman student’s experience of the world is limited, although this will vary. It is also true to say that most are not familiar with current affairs, world and national events – aside from the dramatic news that often shocks and appalls us.

Having got them thinking, of equal importance is getting them to understand more about why they think what they think. Family, society and culture all affect how we view the world. While working with topics within the writing skills tasks, lecturers can thus work on two awareness raising goals. Chamberlain, in Utley, 2004 states these as:

1. cognitive, that is, adding to the learner’s stock of knowledge
2. affective, that is, changing the trainee’s attitude by developing openness, tolerance, acceptance and awareness

B. Teaching Writing Skills

1. The “nuts and bolts”

Another area is what Chamberlain (2004) labels “content”. For the writing skills teacher this will be the ‘nuts and bolts’ of academic writing, how to set out their ideas in a way that communicates clearly, demonstrating a high degree of verbal competence. This can be done in numerous ways from the cognitive such as readings and discussions to the more experiential or problem solving approach.

This area obviously covers the more ‘mechanical’ aspects of writing skills including introductions and conclusions, thesis statements, coherence and unity, topic sentences, etc. It also addresses the need for a wide range of vocabulary and
grammatical structures, used accurately and appropriately. For many students this is what they think they are coming to class to learn about and these things are indeed important.

2. Genre Analysis

Within academic writing, genre is also important and as students come from different faculties they do need to be aware that aside from different lexis there are also differences in text organization and style for each discipline. For the first few semesters at SGU however, writing skills focuses more on a general pattern of IELTS style academic essay writing. This facilitates clear thinking, planning and execution of essay writing and allows lecturers to focus on accurate grammar and vocabulary building. In later semesters the development of the sense of awareness within a written genre is given more attention if requested by the faculties.

3. Hedging

A key feature in academic writing is that of being cautious, sometimes called “hedging” (Skelton, 1988) or “vague language” (Channell, 1994). Hedging means expressing yourself in terms that are not too definite, committing yourself to only a certain degree of certainty. Hyland (1994) ranked the frequency of expressions of hedging in various ESP and EAP textbooks. In order of highest frequency he found use of:

1. Modal verbs e.g. may, might, should, must
2. Lexical verbs e.g. seem, tend, indicate, suggest

Also of importance are numerical expressions such as some, a few, around, modification to nouns such as a strong, slight, definite, adverbs of frequency such as rarely, occasionally, sometimes and attribution such as according to, it is believed, based on, etc.

Numerous communicative and enjoyable activities can be created out of this topic (Brown, 2011), and with a little thought and preparation they can be made relevant to the challenge of getting students to think and evaluate what they think.

4. Practice in exploiting writing tasks

Example 1

An early and seemingly innocuous topic from the very beginning of Semester 1 last year was based around the essay question: Should a city try to preserve its old, historic buildings or replace them with modern ones? The objective for the lesson was to introduce students to the concept of the thesis statement. After being given a topic, students worked in groups to brainstorm and then draw up an essay plan and develop their understanding of the thesis statement. Using a beamer, the example essay plan in Appendix 1 was slowly revealed.

This example essay plan was to be support for them in understanding exactly what was required in the thesis statement. With the “teach essay organization” part of the lesson completed, a Socratic questioning technique was used to elaborate on what exactly was meant by the supporting ideas in paragraphs 2 and 3.
Reflection and Discussion

1. What is a source of national pride in Indonesia?

2. How can a building – bricks and mortar – be educational?
   
   Did you enjoy visiting national heritage buildings as a child? What did you learn?

3. Do tourists really come to a city or country to look at its buildings?

4. Have you ever been somewhere just to see something?

5. How would preserved buildings promote Indonesia abroad?

The questions were tackled to begin with as a whole group and then in small groups. The model of answering in the opening plenary allowed students to see how much detail they could go into.

**Examples of student’s answers (without the wisecracks):**

1. What is a source of national pride in Indonesia?

   S1 : Monas.
   T : Could you tell me why?
   S1 : It is a symbol of our independence from the Dutch.
   T : How do you know this?
   S1 : My teacher told me. And the museum at the base of the monument is like a record of our struggle in pictures. It reminds us of what happened and makes us feel proud.
   S2 : It’s a unique design and dominates the Jakarta skyline. Whenever you see it, it just means “Indonesia”.
   S3 : The design is like Indonesia – pushing up and away from domination, into the clouds. And the gold at the top is the sign of our wealth and that good things will come.
   S4 : It symbolizes the new Indonesia. When tourists come to Jakarta, they have to see it. It’s like visiting the Eiffel Tower or the Golden Gate Bridge.
   T : So Monas is Indonesia’s Eiffel Tower?
   Ss : Yeh … it is.

2. How can a building – bricks and mortar – be educational?

   Did you enjoy visiting national heritage buildings as a child? What did you learn?

3. Do tourists really come to a city or country to look at its buildings?

4. Have you ever been somewhere just to see something?

5. How would preserved buildings promote Indonesia abroad?

**Other topics identified by the students as sources of national pride.**

- batik
- Padang food
- fried rice
- Bali
- friendly, smiling people
- Borobudur
- the battle against corruption

**Example 2**

Whilst still at the stage of brainstorming, introduction writing and writing good thesis statements, the following essay was set. Students were asked to work in class on an essay plan.
Many of today’s critical problems can only be solved with international cooperation.

_Do you agree or disagree with this statement. Give specific reasons and any examples from your own experience._

The main problem with the above is that of interpretation. Students are required to actually identify the ‘critical problems’, linking this to the idea of ‘international cooperation’.

Students proved to be very creative when deciding what these most critical problems might be ranging from natural catastrophes to fluctuations in the money market. A problem identification technique was used, where, having brainstormed all the possible problems, they were asked to identify just five. Then from these five, they were asked to focus on just two.

Important here was an understanding of what ‘international cooperation’ meant. Many leapt on the statement as meaning unwelcome outside interference within a sovereign nation’s rule. They wanted to stress the independence of a country like Indonesia and rejection of the need for outside assistance. Yet, as they came to see, if they had rushed ahead and answered the question in that way they could have been missing important aspects of the question.

The concept of ‘cooperation’ was also debated; did it mean ‘help’ in a negative way, implying that the country on the receiving end was in some way in a deficit situation? Many students felt that this was how they originally viewed the question, leading them to examine why they had felt this way. Was Indonesia, in their eyes, the proverbial poor relation?

Finally there was a call for a more objective look at the question. Aside from the instruction to give _any examples from your own experience_, was the writer being specifically asked to write about Indonesia?

**Initial brainstorming of the critical problems**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>corruption</th>
<th>manipulation of money markets</th>
<th>natural disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, floods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>malnutrition</td>
<td>human trafficking</td>
<td>deforestation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religious conflict</td>
<td>water supply</td>
<td>educational resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drugs</td>
<td>pollution</td>
<td>global warming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cyber attacks</td>
<td>prostitution</td>
<td>copy-cat nations (e.g. Who owns <em>batik</em>?!)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Restricted to five issues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>natural disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, floods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>human trafficking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drugs</td>
<td>global warming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cyber attacks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Not only did the work we did in class help clarify for the students what the essay question was asking, it also allowed students to look at how they viewed their homeland.

This led in a following session to an activity from Utley, 2004 called Where do you come from?

1. Students are asked what they think has made them the way they are, especially in the way they communicate with others. Are their personal characteristics ones that they were born with or ones they have inherited?
2. Working in pairs, each student talks for five minutes. The listener is then asked to summarize what their partner has said, emphasizing points he thought interesting.

### Where do you come from?

**Aims:**
To explore some of the factors influencing the communication style and cultural profile of individuals.

To gain a better understanding of one’s own profile.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inherent personal characteristics, inherited at birth; emotional and physical attributes</td>
<td>The influence of job, daily work activities and working environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nurture</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early life: general environment, family atmosphere, friends, school, social groups</td>
<td>Any characteristics you consider fairly typical of you nationality, including any regional features</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School, college, university: the influence of teachers, friends, and of the subjects you studied.</td>
<td>The culture of the organization you work for.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As most SGU students are Indonesian, this is a particularly good topic as it raises the issues of stereotypes between the different ethnic groups. It encourages reflection of how representative they are of their national culture.

**Example 3**

Having written an essay on the roles of men and women, it was quite natural to pick up some of the comments that students had made. It was ripe for exploitation in the area of hedging. The following activity is thus based on sentences actually written by the students.

**Hedging: rewrite the following sentences so that they sound more tentative**

1. For that reason women can always persuade their colleagues effectively.
2. When women clean the house they do it until the result is perfect.
3. When driving, women drive slower than men.
4. As we know, there are always doubts about women’s ability in the workforce.
5. Nowadays, every woman has a chance to have a career.
6. In our modern society there is no difference between men and women.
7. Imagine a woman is an astronaut and something goes wrong. What will she do? Of course she will panic.
8. Women are careful and pay attention to detail.
9. Mentally men are logical and objective whereas women are emotional and subjective.
10. Women always panic when there is an emergency.

Of course the subject matter is amusing which makes it in itself a good basis for an activity. But in addition there are so many language issues that can be brought up making students more aware of the need to be tentative.

**Example 4**

This final example touches on genre analysis and raises awareness about degrees of formality. The students are given a mixed up selection of sentences and asked to arrange them into three separate paragraphs in the correct order.

a) Critical issues will be setting the switch-off delay in different locations, i.e. how long the lights remain on after the last movement is detected.
b) A helicopter hovers between towering pylons fizzing with extra-high-voltage power of 400,000 volts.
c) Could you look at the practicalities of using presence detectors for controlling the lights in different parts of the building?
d) During the party, I sat next to a new student who is ambitious, attractive – and dangerous.
Students are asked to decide where they think the passages would have come from and finally select one of the passages for further activity.

The passage the students select is always Text 1 which leads into a discussion of appropriate behaviour in social contexts. The full text and ‘Agony Aunt’s’ reply below certainly creates some controversy. It usually involves in depth discussion about young people’s behaviour and questions whether this is cultural or more related to the social norms of the group you are in.

Answer key:

Text 1: Newspaper ‘Agony Aunt’ problem page

I am a fifth semester student who has done something stupid at a faculty party held to welcome new students. During the party, I sat next to a new student who is ambitious, attractive – and dangerous. I was a little intimidated by her so didn’t know how to say “No, thanks” when she suggested we go back to her room for coffee. You can imagine the rest.

I am in a serious relationship with my girlfriend of four years and we hope to marry. The next day I tried to apologise to the new student and said it was a mistake, but she just refused to accept it. Whenever we bump into each other between classes, she acts as if we are intimate. I am worried she will spill the beans to my faculty friends and lecturers. Or, even worse, tell my girlfriend. Help.

Agony Aunt’s answer

You don’t have one problem, you have three: the girlfriend problem, the gorgeous co-student problem and the other-people-at-university problem. No wonder you are feeling frazzled. First, your girlfriend. Don’t tell her. If I were going out with you (and, on balance, I’m quite glad I’m not), I’d rather not know. If the dangerous woman does decide to tell, she herself is going to look bad –vindictive and morally dodgy. The rest of your university? Well, look, they probably already know and to be honest, young people sometimes do act inappropriately. This needn’t be the end of the
world. As for the dangerous lady, keep your distance, be professional and keep your head down.

Adapted from Daily Mail, 2007

**Text 2: Extract from electricity company newsletter**

A helicopter hovers between towering pylons fizzing with extra-high-voltage power of 400,000 volts. Two men in stainless-steel threaded hot suits stand in a cradle dangling from the aircraft. One of the men reaches out to the cable holding a metal wand which causes small, short, lightning bolts to arc through the air. The man feels only a slight tingle as he clips a lead to the live wire connecting it to the cradle and helicopter.

Ibbotson, 2008

**Text 3: Email, Mechanical and Electrical Building Project**

Could you look at the practicalities of using presence detectors for controlling the lights in different parts of the building? We’ll probably need to have a mixture of detector-controlled systems and manual switches. Critical issues will be setting the switch-off delay in different locations, i.e. how long the lights remain on after the last movement is detected. On my last project, we had a lot of complaints from the client about the lights going off while people were still in rooms.

Ibbotson, 2008

**Conclusion**

Teaching the “nuts and bolts” of writing skills can be an opportunity to exploit key interests for students, namely, themselves. Finding out about ‘who you are’ and why you act the way you do is absorbing. In our busy world, we need more time to reflect and linking writing skills with awareness raising activities allows us to do this. Encouragement to think more deeply helps us get away from the instant gratification we get from our social networks and moves us beyond the superficial stimulus-response mode. Writing skills are important and with careful teaching can be developed. Coming to know yourself better and being able to contemplate a wide variety of issues calmly is a valuable life skill.

**References**


Skelton, J. (1988). The care and maintenance of hedges. *ELT Journal 42 (1).*


Appendix 1

Essay plan

Essay question: Should a city try to preserve its old, historic buildings or replace them with modern ones?

Opinion or topic: Preserve

Main ideas:
- National heritage
- Tourist attraction

Supporting ideas within paragraphs 2 & 3:
1. Source of national pride
2. History - education
3.

1. Would attract more tourists
2. Would be a positive promotion of Indonesia abroad
3.