

Writing Center and Its Supportive Activities in Teaching Academic Writing at the International University

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ABSTRACT

Writing Across the Curriculum is designed to boost student's critical thinking skills by requiring them to write in all of their classes. This paper presents the supportive roles and activities of the Writing Center (as a free service) in teaching Academic Writing at the International University. The purposes of this paper are: (a) to give some innovative practices in helping students study Academic English in Vietnamese universities, (b) to share and learn from other universities' Writing Center activities, and (c) to discuss some problems (the Writing Center is a non-profit service) and find out the best possible solutions to improve university students' writing skill and the tutors' benefits. This research focuses on the Writing Center activities collaborating with Writing Across the Curriculum and all writing activities to support non English-majored students. The research shows the highly satisfactory result from tutoring activities by IU students and tutors. The research also gives some recommendations to make the best use of the Writing Center.

INTRODUCTION

The results of the first year-students' English placement tests and interviews conducted in the previous academic years at the IU showed that those students lacked academic writing skills. It seemed that many of those had not been involved in any writing course before entering the IU. In addition, the transfer of both syntactic-semantic and organizational structure from the students' first language - Vietnamese to the second language acquisition - causes a problem for Vietnamese students in composing a good English essay.

Most schools encourage writing across the curriculum (WAC). That is, papers are not only assigned in English classes but also in bio-technology, information technology, engineering, and other classes. Teachers will probably tutor papers from a variety of disciplines, some of which you are unfamiliar; however, even if teachers are not experts on the topic of a paper, the teacher can still help the writers. Tutors often help students with papers on subjects about which they have no

knowledge, such as benefits of shale for a geology paper or the treatment of knee injuries for a sports-medicine paper. Tutors also help writers with literature papers about works they never read. Therefore, the aims of the study “*Writing Center and Its Supportive Roles in Teaching Academic Writing at the International University*” are to identify how well the Writing Center functions: (a) to give some innovative practices in helping students study Academic English at the International University, (b) to share and learn from other universities’ WC activities, and (c) to discuss some problems (the Writing Center is a non-profit service) and find out the best possible solutions to improve university students’ writing skill and the tutors’ benefits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regarding the perspectives into two learning styles: collaborative and independent, a study by Kubota revealed that Asian college students like Japanese, Vietnamese with appropriate supervision, tend to respond positively to a more collaborative style of writing or writing in which dialogue between themselves as writers and others help them to achieve a final goal (Kubota, 1999). Independent writing requires facilitation, and this writing style is normally achieved through successful “dialogue” between writer and assessor through teacher feedback at every stage of the writing process (Atkinson & Cannor, 2008).

Another study from Stephen M. North (Murphy, C., & Sherwood, S. 2008), North contends that many students, writing instructors, and faculty in other disciplines do not understand the role of the writing center. They tend to view the writing center as a “skill center” or “fix-it shop” for grammar correction and writer remediation rather than as a place of active learning and student enrichment. North directs tutors toward examining a student’s text as an indicator of the processes that produced it, rather than as product that must be reworked to meet accepted standards of form and correctness. In this fashion, and in his assertion that tutoring should be “student-centered” rather than text-oriented, he endorses the primary tenets of expressivism in writing center pedagogy. A classic essay, frequently quoted and cited in writing center scholarship, the idea of a writing center is important for tutors in contrasting two models of writing center instruction - one that stresses “the correction of textual problems” and another that focuses on the writer’s intellectual and personal involvement in the creation of texts.

METHOD

Participants

In order to successfully fulfill the concerned tasks above in keeping with the aims of the study, the following spheres of investigation should be taken into consideration:

We decided to employ a qualitative rather than quantitative approach to carry out the survey. 100 first-year students were selected for the study (roughly 20% of the total students enrolled in that academic year). These students were selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, they were selected to represent different schools, including BA, BT, EE, IT, ISE, BME. Secondly, first-year students were chosen as the focus group because one of the goals of the Center is to enable access to the various schools as well as to academic and disciplinary courses. Also, generally about 80% of the students who use the Writing Center are first-year students.

Measurement

As the title of this study suggested, the following steps should be taken to make full analyses of how well the WC has been operating and whether its applications are fruitful at the IU:

An investigation to find out how well the Writing Center at the International University supports Academic Writing by analyzing data from two main sources: 1) the result of a survey considering the students' and tutors' perceptions into whether or not the Writing Center services help, and 2) a comparison of students' academic records including their scores from mid-term exam and final exam their academic writing.

One way of trying to investigate our intervention on students' writing was to get students to fill in a Session Evaluation Form after each consultation. Students were asked to comment on "excellent", "good", "fair", and "weak" aspects of the consultation in the feedback forms, and answered their tutors' questions on identifying and understanding macro (introductions, conclusions, paraphrasing) or micro (arrangement of sentences, language use) structural issues.

In an attempt to track individual improvement in student writing, an Improvement Form is developed for recording improvements from first to final semester writing drafts/exercise/tests.

Data was collected in the form of information from evaluation forms, students' comments, and students' improvement grades. The students' and the tutors' perceptions on Writing Center interventions were synthesized and analyzed. The writing marks of the students across the semester were critically compared. The data from the final analyses laid the foundation for this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Supportive Roles in Teaching Academic Writing from the Writing Center

The WC provides opportunities for undergraduate students to improve writing and thinking skills in their academic work, and also in preparation for their respective careers. In a comfortable and supportive atmosphere, trained tutors (teachers) with a wide variety of majors assist writers individually at all stages of the composing process, the WC also makes available printed and pdf materials, as well as workshops, on topics related to writing and teaching writing.

- Tutoring Activities

Tutoring activities are the major and most important task (compared to the workshop activities) at the WC since this is very demanding for the needs from the writers. Each week, tutors are scheduled for a certain number of hours, the majority of which will be spent consulting with students, observing other sessions, and developing the skills. The tutor provides face-to-face consultations for the students, faculty, and staff of all schools of the IU, but students are clearly predominant. Consultations are available for students of all majors. This fact raises the question whether it is necessary for the tutor to be an expert on the subject matter of the paper that the student is working on. Many theorists claim that consultants do not have to be experts on the subject of the paper. Indeed there are times when expertise is important, and in some cases, specific knowledge about the writing conventions of particular majors or topics can be very helpful. However, it is the writer who is responsible for being the expert on his/her subject matter. The tutor's job isn't to offer content expertise, but to help the students become familiar with the tools they need to approach a text.

- Workshop

In addition to the tutoring activities, the WC also is supposed to support workshop and seminar. A monthly workshop is scheduled for presenters (who are teachers). Teachers sometimes find out some common problems that students meet in class, and that is the idea for the discussion at the workshop. Teachers can follow the syllabus so as to develop WAC contents for the participants. The workshop focuses on two main aspect, "toolbox" issues (lower-order concerns) and "expert" issues (higher-order concerns). Another big issue in the paper that the tutor has to deal with properly is higher-order and lower-order concerns. Higher-order concerns are connected with such issues as thesis, argument, effective ways of addressing an audience, paragraph organization, and levels of critical thinking should be the priority. Lower-order concerns deal with sentence-level

problems. These problems are not always the result of the author’s carelessness or lack of grammar knowledge. The tutor should not perform as an editor, but provides students with skills and a comprehensive view of what need to be done so the students can carry out the revision themselves.

Findings

With the number of hundreds of visitors enrolled in the WC activities every academic year. We chose 100 students as the object for the survey and evaluation of satisfaction of the WC. The data was analyzed based on the 2 aspects including the degree of satisfaction of the writer and the improvement of academic writing from students after having enrolled the WC consultation.

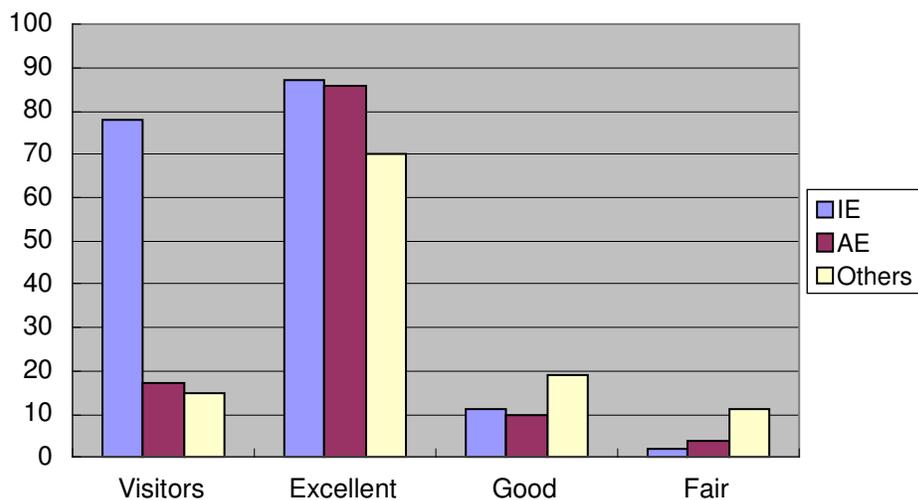


Figure 1: Satisfaction level of the WC activities through the consultation

As can be seen from the graph chart (Figure 1), the major number of visitors is the IE students (78), and the rest are AE students (17) and Others (17 and 15 respectively). After synthesizing the data from the evaluation form, surprisingly, notified that 87% of the IE students supposed that the activities at the WC is excellent. Around 15% of all kinds of students think that the service is good, whereas a very small amount of students consider it “fair”. It’s interesting to say that there are not any visitors grading “weak” for the the consultation at the WC. This shows that majority of students are highly satisfactory with the WC activities in supporting academic writing at the IU.

EN007IU	09	BAFNUI14086	Châu Yến	Nghi	53	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BABAIU14168	Bùi Minh	Ngọc	35	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BAFNUI14089	Ngô Nguyễn Phước	Nguyễn	43	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BAFNUI14092	Trần Hà	Nguyễn	54	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BTFTIU14054	Hồng Thanh Uyên	Nhi	63	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	IELSIU14055	Ngô Thị Tú	Nhi	40	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BABAIU14188	Trần Kim Hồng	Nhi	45	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BEBEIU14075	Phùng Thiện	Phúc	30	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205	Nợ HP	EN
EN007IU	09	IEIEIU14036	Nguyễn Nhật	Quang	50	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	IEIESB13003	Trần Anh	Quang	30	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BTBCIU14038	Luyện Ngọc Đỗ	Quyên	55	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BTBTIU14201	Trần Thái Thanh	Tâm	51	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205	Nợ HP	EN
EN007IU	09	IELSIU14069	Ngô Hớn	Tân	58	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BTARIU13021	Nguyễn Nhật	Thanh	20	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205	Nợ HP	EN
EN007IU	09	BABAIU14246	Nguyễn Thị Phương	Thảo	67	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BTBTIU14220	Thái Đức	Thị	38	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	EEACIU14057	Lương Trường	Thịnh	44	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BABAIU14149	Đậu Hồng Mai	Thy	75	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BTFTIU14107	Nguyễn Thị Thanh	Trúc	52	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	ITITIU14103	Lê Sơn	Trường	40	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	IEIEIU14049	Nguyễn Xuân	Trường	40	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BABAAU12035	Phạm Giáp	Tuất	36	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BTBCIU14052	Hà Thị Ngọc	Vy	44	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN
EN007IU	09	BAFNUI14194	Huỳnh Hải	Yến	57	Writing AE1	4/2/2015	7	A2.205		EN

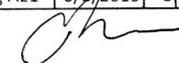
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Figure 2: Mid-term exam result of Academic Writing posted in April 2015

EN007IU	09	BAFNUI14086	Châu Yến	Nghi	66	75	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BABAIU14168	Bùi Minh	Ngọc	44	52	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BAFNUI14089	Ngô Nguyễn Phước	Nguyễn	68	57	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BAFNUI14092	Trần Hà	Nguyễn	78	67	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BTFTIU14054	Hồng Thanh Uyên	Nhi	70	70	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	IELSIU14055	Ngô Thị Tú	Nhi	71	70	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BABAIU14188	Trần Kim Hồng	Nhi	68	59	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BEBEIU14075	Phùng Thiện	Phúc	45	absent	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	IEIEIU14036	Nguyễn Nhật	Quang	50	66	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	IEIESB13003	Trần Anh	Quang	65	42	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BTBCIU14038	Luyện Ngọc Đỗ	Quyên	80	68	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BTBTIU14201	Trần Thái Thanh	Tâm	55	60	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	IELSIU14069	Ngô Hớn	Tân	76	46	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BTARIU13021	Nguyễn Nhật	Thanh	0	absent	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BABAIU14246	Nguyễn Thị Phương	Thảo	50	41	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BTBTIU14220	Thái Đức	Thị	48	56	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	EEACIU14057	Lương Trường	Thịnh	65	59	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BAFNUI14149	Đậu Hồng Mai	Thy	68	41	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BTFTIU14107	Nguyễn Thị Thanh	Trúc	65	60	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	ITITIU14103	Lê Sơn	Trường	65	61	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	IEIEIU14049	Nguyễn Xuân	Trường	67	67	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BABAAU12035	Phạm Giáp	Tuất	20	55	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BTBCIU14052	Hà Thị Ngọc	Vy	68	65	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN
EN007IU	09	BAFNUI14194	Huỳnh Hải	Yến	50	38	Writing AE1	6/8/2015	1	2	A1.208	EN


BUI THI PHUONG THAO

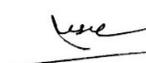

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Figure 3: Final exam result of Academic Writing posted in June 2015

In addition, Figure 2 & Figure 3 show the dramatic improvement in academic writing score from midterm test exam score to the final exam score as well as the assignment score (not all students from the student list are enrolled in the WC assistance). We took some student IDs for the demonstration:

	Student ID	Mid-term score	Assignment score (group work & project)	Final exam score
01	BAFNIU14086	53	66	75
02	BAFNIU14089	43	68	57
03	IELSIU14055	40	71	70
04	BTFTIU14054	63	70	70
05	BABAIU14188	45	68	59

Figure 4: Progressive analysis of academic writing improvement with the support from WC

Discussions

While tutoring students at the WC, we found out that there are quite many problems raised from the writers as well as from the tutors. Although we try to figure them out, we still have some issues open for the discussions. We also suggest some solutions for each single issue. However, we don't think they are the best answers for different situations. That's the reason for us to raise these as the important part of the paper: Here are some common types of the writers that we occasionally encounter:

- The unresponsive writer: teachers sometimes require students to visit the Writing Center, and occasionally, such writers come with an attitude of resistance. They may refuse to answer teacher's questions, give halfhearted answer, or otherwise indicate that they do not wish to be there. (Teachers need to be patient and polite. Remind writers that you are there to help and try to recognize that even your best efforts may not change writers' attitudes).
- The writer who comes at the last minute: students who come for help just before their paper is due. (Teachers should be kind and sympathetic. Help writers sort through options and figure out what he or she can reasonably do in the time remaining).
- A great deal of writers who show at one time. (Teachers should be patient and try to figure out if the writers wish to share the same needs or problems, if so, teachers can manage to help; otherwise, teachers should explain the registration process to the walk-in visitors).

- The antagonistic writer: for some writers, composing a paper looms as an extremely frustrating - perhaps even impossible - task. They may be apprehensive about writing in general or upset about demands placed on them by a particular assignment or teacher. (Teachers need to be patient and supportive. Allow students to vent their feelings and tell you what is upsetting).
- The writer who selects an inappropriate topic or uses offensive language: teacher may work with writers whose papers are laced inappropriately with offensive language, such as racist or sexist terms. (Teachers need to be patient and polite. Remind students that they are writing for an academic community, and ask them to consider how their audience will react to the language or topic).
- The writer who plagiarizes: Students usually have problems of summarizing, paraphrasing, and documenting sources. (Teachers need to show students how to avoid plagiarism by explaining the importance of taking notes from sources carefully).
- WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum): Writers ask for some kinds papers, such as: research papers, lab reports and scientific papers, argument or position papers, literature papers, book, film, and play reviews, power-point presentations, resumes, cover letters, essay of application. (Teachers need to have supports from available handouts, materials for checklists, and proofreading techniques).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

As stated in my hypothesis, I believe that the role of the Writing Center has brought quite many benefits for both the students and the teachers in teaching academic writing. The experimental data supported my hypothesis, indicating that with the assistance from the WC, students (writers) have a significant improvement through three criteria including the mid-term examination, the assignment, and the final examination.

Through my research as well as my experience, I discovered that the WC plays a very positive role in improving the language skills, especially the academic writing skill. Ideas for a future experiment for all students would be conducted to have more fruitful outcomes.

Recommendations

This research would give a lot of benefits to students as well as teachers. For writing teachers who tutor students at the Writing Center and consider it as a media to help your students improve academic writing skills, the recommendations are described as follows:

- It's essential to keep abreast of reference books on Writing Center bookshelves. Even if teachers aren't assigned to read a particular essay, you should already be looking through the various books and newsletters located in the Center.
- Don't ever make the mistake of thinking that you already know pretty much everything you need to know about this line of work. There's always another insight or perspective you can learn from.

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