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Focusing on Text-Based Writing

Of the different types of written assignments, L2 writers in Western contexts and in many academic EFL contexts are often expected to produce text-based writing. By text-based writing, we mean writing that is based on the reading of source texts. Scholars do this type of writing when they write literature reviews, professionals do it when they synthesize information for a report, and students do it when they write summaries, research papers, book reviews, and argument or analytical essays. This type of writing involves processing a lot of information, developing something to say about that information, and presenting it clearly. In addition, it involves meeting readers' expectations that the text incorporate the ideas of others appropriately (i.e., without plagiarizing). These factors—being informed, presenting a clear line of argument, and referencing—form the basis of authority in text-based writing.

Being Informed

Writers become informed by reading texts. Scholars' authority stems from the fact that they have read widely in their field. Students, however, cannot be expected to have read as widely as scholars and experts, so when constructing an assignment, the teacher may narrow the field for them. One way to do this is to create theme-based units that incorporate a set of texts, as discussed in the previous chapter. These could be written or multimedia texts. One advantage of using your own set is that you can encourage students to develop their own ideas about how the texts relate to one another. Having access to the source texts that students use allows teachers to provide feedback on the effectiveness of their source use.

In order to fully comprehend the texts, students need to read interactively and efficiently. Teachers should encourage students to take notes when they read because doing so promotes interaction with the ideas and helps students develop the confidence to form their own positions. Students should take notes when they do not understand something, are surprised, or agree or disagree with what is written. Also, they should take notes on the ways in which a text relates to other texts and to their lived experiences. Making connections among texts lays the groundwork for the synthesis they will need to do when writing. They may also extend their notes by keeping reading journals, discussing readings in small groups, or organizing notes in a graphic organizer or an outline.

In addition to reading with the purpose of acquiring information, students should also read to evaluate the source for credibility. This type of evaluation also yields important contextual information that writers can use to analyze, critique, and synthesize the source texts. Using two different types of texts is useful when teaching students how to evaluate sources. For example, a teacher can include a research study and a personal essay on the same topic in a theme-based unit. Students could then research the status of the authors (university-based researcher? high school graduate?), the extent of their knowledge (broad? narrow?), and the type of support they use (empirical research? lived experience?). Students are asked to consider how these different pieces of information affect the writer's credibility.

Alternatively, to practice differentiating bias from differing perspectives, teachers can provide two articles on the same topic with contradictory, but legitimate, interpretations. Such an assignment would also help students think about how writers use sources for specific purposes.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Students sometimes comment, "I'm just a student. How can I have an opinion about this text, when it was written by a researcher with a PhD?" How would you respond to this?

Presenting a Clear Line of Argument

At the heart of good writing is having something to say. Student writers often need help developing a line of argument connected to what has already been written on a topic. Essential to helping students find something to say is choosing a topic that they have some prior experience with. Having students complete prewriting assignments in which they explore a topic in their own lives before doing any research on it may help. For example, a student who comes to the topic of gender roles through her grandmother's stories about marriage has found a distinct perspective to bring to the topic.

Because students may feel uncomfortable or unqualified to present an original argument, teachers may want to help them analyze what constitutes originality. Originality does not have to be an idea that no one has ever thought of before or the presentation of data that the writer collected. Rather, originality can be putting together texts in new ways, comparing texts to lived experience, analyzing a text critically for its assumptions, or bringing an idea from one community or culture into another.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Students sometimes comment, "Everything has already been said by someone else. How can I say anything new?"

- How would you respond to this?

Using Sources

Appropriate use of source texts is essential to establishing a writer's authority. Through the use of references, writers show that they are informed and that they have chosen to align themselves with certain authors. Proper referencing goes far beyond learning to avoid plagiarism. Although Western teachers often think of referencing as involving a clear set of rules, in fact it involves acquiring a complex cultural understanding of how English writers think about textual ownership and textual construction (see Polio & Shi, 2012).

Plagiarism is a complicated issue for several reasons. First, many L2 writers who are still developing their language skills may simply not have sufficient mastery of the language to understand the readings and express them in their own words. Second, L2 writers' prior schooling may not have included much instruction on referencing. Third, L2 writers from many non-Western writing cultures may not understand why plagiarism is discussed in connection to morality in Western contexts. Most L2 writers do not intend to be deceitful or break any rules, and if they are accused of plagiarism, they often struggle to understand why teachers feel so angry or hurt.

Therefore, rather than scolding or simply restating the rules, teachers need to show students how to construct texts and give them the academic language they need to relate their own ideas to quotes, paraphrases, and summaries of their source texts. One lesson teachers can develop is how to produce a sentence that introduces a source text. You can explain that such a sentence may include the author's name, the year of publication, the title, the genre, and an overview of the main point or purpose. Then, give an example such as: the book *Teaching Writing* is an introductory manual that outlines key features of effective writing instruction for L2 writers. Students can then discuss the example and write introductory sentences for the source texts that they are reading. Additional practice on integrating sources and evaluating the quality of such source integration can be provided (Tomaš, 2010).

Teachers should also explain that an effective writer in the Western context constructs a text by maintaining the distinction between his or her own voice and the voices of other writers (Mott-Smith, 2011). To help students understand what is meant by different voices in a text, teachers can provide a source-based text and have students highlight the different voices in it. This exercise, which is particularly effective for visual learners, models the expected balance between an author's ideas and those from source texts in a piece of text-based writing.

Another engaging activity is to have students interview each other about their experiences learning English and then include each other's quotations in their essays. This activity is effective because students like to work hard to credit their peers correctly and integrate their peers' ideas with their own.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we focused on the factors that make text-based writing authoritative: being informed, having a fresh line of argument, and referencing properly. In Chapter 5, we discuss the importance of encouraging effective strategy use.