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Author

Takano, Naoko

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Making Progress: A Case Study of Academic Literacy Development

The processes by which unprepared freshmen are able to develop their academic literacy are overlooked by those in the academy. The author will describe a case study of the development of a student's academic literacy in the 1st 3 semesters of college. The information for this project was obtained through interviews with the student and her teacher, observation of her ESL classes, and analysis of her writing. The author will provide 4 major findings of her success studies as well as important implications for students and teachers in the TESOL field.

Introduction

As someone who worked as a teaching assistant for 1.5 years in the ESL Program at San Francisco State University, I recognize the importance of gaining academic literacy skills in order to be successful in American universities. With few or no academic skills, and without an understanding of university expectations, many international ESL students enter American universities underprepared. In my 2nd week of work as a teaching assistant, I noticed that students filled their textbooks with definitions of words in their native language and highlighted almost every sentence. Despite the large amount of time they spent reading outside of class, their participation was low. As a result, they did not know how to share their thoughts about the readings in English. When it came time to write their first journals, a few of the students told me that "we don't know how to write American-style papers." They ended up writing only a few sentences describing the reading, sharing very little of what they thought. My experience as a teaching assistant shows that they often struggled with the amount of reading necessary for their course work and also with writing academic papers. Cummins (1994) states that ESL students often do not have the proficiency required to be successful academically and linguistically in mainstream university classes. In other words, students' TOEFL scores often do not indicate how successful they will be when reading textbooks, taking notes, writing papers, and listening to lectures in mainstream classes. However, as Bifuh-Ambe (2009) argues, teachers may believe that students who have the required TOEFL score are ready to participate in the academic discourse community. This belief is often incorrect, however, and these students will likely benefit from ESL classes in which they learn reading, writing, and other college

skills, giving them a strong and solid foundation of English language academic skills and an understanding of expectations at American universities.

Because I noticed the lack of ESL students' preparedness for university course work, I became interested in how these students acquire the skills necessary to be successful students. Therefore, I decided to investigate how a particular student experiences the learning of academic skills in the ESL classes in her first 3 semesters at the university and how she could apply these skills in mainstream classes to become a confident and successful learner. For this research, I specifically chose to do a case study, because observing a student over a short period would not give a balanced view of her experience. Over a long period, however, there was enough time to see her academic growth and to make inferences about it. I chose one student as it enabled me to focus deeply on her course work, and it simplified the collection and analysis of data over a long period.

My Case Study Over 3 Semesters

To understand more about case studies, I read many articles about academic literacy development, which enabled me to choose research questions for my case study. After the questions were created, I decided on an appropriate participant and acquired data using multiple methods.

The Questions I Considered

For my study, I decided on four research questions to find out how a student experiences the processes of learning in ESL classes. The research questions that I decided on are:

1. How does a particular student gain academic literacy through the ESL classes?
2. How do her attitudes about academic literacy change throughout the 3 semesters?
3. What does she find more effective about learning in these classes?
4. How does she apply what she has learned in these classes to mainstream classes?

My Case Study Participant

It took some time to decide on the participant for my research. The ideal participant would be someone who came to the US very recently with few skills in an American academic setting, because more change in his or her skill set could be observed throughout the semesters. My participant, Tina, was a 17-year-old freshman student from China. She came here in August before the semester started. She was from a small town where she rarely saw foreigners, although she had studied English at school since she was 7. She came here to gain new opportunities, broaden her knowledge about her major, which was biology, and also find a better job in her country. I chose her to be the participant for my research because of her high motivation for studying here: to achieve her goal of becoming a successful student and a successful person after graduation.

Classes My Participant Attended

I frequently observed classes she attended as part of my data collection. The classes she attended were Developmental Composition I&II and Second Year Composition.

In her 1st and 2nd semester, Tina took Developmental Composition I&II. These classes are designed for ESL freshmen who graduated from high school right before entering the university, and who scored in the lowest quartile on the English placement test. These students are required to take these remedial classes before they can take First Year Composition. The two classes are connected, and students take Developmental Composition II in the spring semester after they have completed Developmental Composition I in the fall semester. The teacher and students are the same throughout both classes during the course of a school year. The purpose of the classes is to allow these students to explore the expectations of American universities as well as the academic reading and writing skills that are necessary to be competitive. These small classes, with only 15 to 18 students, allow enough time to practice new skills and make sure that they can apply these skills inside and outside of the classes. The teacher also has enough time to work with students individually. These classes help students with university preparation, such as learning how to set a class schedule, managing study time, and learning how to study with students who are native speakers of English.

First Year Composition focuses on preparing students for the more advanced composition tasks they will undertake in Second Year Composition. Students usually take this class after completing Developmental Composition I&II. However, Tina skipped this class because of her high performance in these classes.

In her 3rd semester, she attended Second Year Composition. This class helps students improve their writing skills by focusing on the style of writing and revision that is required for the university. Students improve their reading skills by reading many articles and essays. Unlike in Developmental Composition I&II, students are encouraged to be more independent, as they have basic fundamental reading and writing skills. The teacher of this class was the same teacher who taught her Developmental Composition I&II classes. Tina chose the same teacher because she was comfortable with her teaching style.

The Methods I Applied

The methods I applied were: interviews with the student (nine times, 1 hour each time), observations of Developmental Composition I&II and Second Year Composition, informal interviews with the teacher in these classes, and analysis of the student's writing. I chose these methods because as a graduate student, I frequently visited language classrooms to analyze how teachers taught and how students learned. By taking detailed observation notes and asking questions of the teachers and students afterward, I was able to better understand the classes. Subsequently, I applied these methods to understand Tina's learning processes on a deeper level.

Throughout the 3 semesters, I conducted interviews nine times for approx-

imately 1 hour per interview. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate Tina's learning experiences and ways of thinking. In the very first interview, I asked her questions about things such as her life in China and her English educational background, her first impressions of what makes good readers and writers, and her studies in both ESL and mainstream classes. In the rest of the interviews, we continued to talk about her impressions of good readers and writers, how her studies were going, and how she applied the strategies she learned in the ESL classes to her mainstream ones. For the last interview, I asked her about her final impressions of good readers and writers, her reflections on her 1st year at an American university, and her goals for the next semester.

I made observations in her ESL classes as often as possible throughout the 3 semesters. While observing, I took field notes on her progress in the class. In my field notes, I wrote down how she participated during in-class work such as whole-class discussions, group work, presentations, and individual work, and how her participation might have changed throughout the 3 semesters. One of my intentions for observing her classes was so that a comparison could be drawn between what I saw and how she perceived her own classroom participation.

I held frequent informal talks with the teacher of Developmental Composition I&II and Second Year Composition to discuss the student's learning processes. This provided me with a view from the teacher's perspective about how Tina's learning developed and changed.

I collected some of her writings in Developmental Composition I&II and Second Year Composition as samples. I also observed conferences between Tina and her teacher, during which they discussed her papers. Through analysis of her writing, I made a comparison between what she said in our interviews and what was observed in her actual writing. In addition, I analyzed her writing process, how she developed and revised her ideas based on the feedback from her teacher and peers.

My Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the data collected during this case study led to four major findings:

1. Moving from struggling to successful;
2. Thriving in a low-stakes environment;
3. Successfully transferring strategies to mainstream classes;
4. Writing/reading support from mainstream teachers.

Moving From Struggling to Successful

The most surprising finding was that Tina became a highly successful student in 3 semesters, despite initial difficulties. When I first conducted an interview with her in September, 2 weeks after her 1st semester began, she was still in a stage of excitement because of living in a new place with a new language and culture. She mentioned that "everything is new!" In her country, teachers were

usually the only ones to lead the class, whereas here she was faced with group work and active participation in class. She admitted that her speaking was not very good, and she had a strong Chinese accent compared to those of the other students, which prevented her from participating actively in Developmental Composition I. Additionally, many reading and writing assignments were assigned in Developmental Composition I, which she had never experienced in her country. Because she had so little experience in writing papers, even in her native language, she was confused about how to read and write papers in her second language without knowledge of reading or writing strategies. Despite her initial disadvantages, she became a good reader and writer.

Becoming a Good Reader. Tina started off the semester describing herself as having “weak” reading skills. Her first expectation about a good reader was “someone who can read fast, read perfectly, and understand everything quickly.” Based on these expectations, she stated that she was not a successful student. She used a dictionary often and read slowly in order to pay attention to every sentence.

However, her expectations changed dramatically over the 3 semesters. Her final impression of a good reader at the end of her 3rd semester was “someone who is clear about what they have read, and explains it to others by retelling it in their own words, and also by writing a response,” and “someone who annotates well and fast, gets main points, is clear about the author’s points, and can do critical thinking.”

At first, she said she did not like reading in Chinese or in English. However, she found a love of reading through the novel *The Giver* in Developmental Composition I. While reading this novel she stopped trying to focus on each word and instead focused on the author’s main points. She had in-class discussions about the novel with her classmates, and she realized that reading is not about memorizing each individual word, but about making her own meaning through an understanding of the text. She clearly understood the point that Carrell and Eisterhold (1988) make when they state, “Much of the meaning understood from a text is really not actually in the text, per se, but in the reader” (p. 79).

After discovering a love of reading in Developmental Composition I, she challenged herself to analyze texts on a deeper level in Developmental Composition II, thus gaining critical-thinking skills. As Freire (1983) states, “Reading always involves critical perception, interpretation and rewriting what is read” (p. 11). In the Second Year Composition class, Tina was required to read more than five articles for each paper she wrote. She also needed to finish the reading in a much shorter time than in Developmental Composition I&II. By exploring a variety of readings in Developmental Composition I&II and Second Year Composition, she developed strategies that helped her to be more flexible in her reading, and she used different strategies for different reading purposes. This allowed her to read more quickly, because she knew what to focus on and what she could skip. Therefore, her impressions of a good reader changed dramatically along with her reading proficiency during the 3 semesters.

Becoming a Good Writer. Tina’s writing skills started off weak. Her first

expectation of a good writer was “someone who can write a lot quickly and perfectly.” Tina was confused by the American style of writing, or “knowing the American mind,” as she put it, because the Chinese style of writing is different in that it is indirect. The organization of the Chinese style of writing also differs from the American style of writing. For these reasons, she did not know how to decide what to write in English.

In the course of the 3 semesters, Tina was able to grasp the American way of writing and increase her overall writing skills. Her final expectation of a good writer was “someone who can organize well, use academic words, knows what kind of information they should include to convince their audience, and understands the writing process,” and “someone who can understand the main points of articles and summarize them well, writing short and concise summaries after reading long articles.”

She understood that writing is a way to connect with texts she has read and that “writing provides a unique opportunity for discovering and exploring these contributions and connections, for it allows the reader to dialogue with a text and find a particular way into it” (Zamel, 1992, p. 468).

Understanding the writing process was a big step for Tina. By writing a narrative paper in Developmental Composition I, she learned that writing is a nonlinear process that takes time and multiple drafts to organize many thoughts into a clear and organized paper. She also found that she should not only explain ideas with enough detail, but she should also analyze why these details are important for her audience. By having conferences with her teacher, and peer reviews with her classmates, she realized how to write for her audience and convince her readers of what she was trying to say. Conferences in Developmental Composition I&II were highly beneficial for her, and she always revised and corrected everything that the teacher pointed out. Through an analysis of her writing, I found that she often changed her writings based on feedback from each draft.

Finally, she realized that grammar comes last and that she should put the most focus on the content of her papers. She gained proofreading strategies with which she was able to analyze her own grammatical errors and correct them herself. In the last interview, she said, “I think I am a real writer now.” Murray (1968) says that writing can be improved by practicing the composing process, and that ideas can be generated by the act of writing itself. By writing a variety of papers in Developmental Composition I&II and Second Year Composition, Tina gained confidence and a love of writing.

Thriving in a Low-Stakes Environment

To my surprise, low-stakes classes were a great place to practice academic skills and learn academic strategies. Developmental Composition I&II were friendly learning environments for Tina. The teacher and students remained the same between the two classes, which contributed to this small, safe classroom environment. This allowed her to be more motivated and connected to other students in the classes. She said that “we share problems with others,” meaning that the students in the classes all shared the same problems of learn-

ing a second language. She also recognized that the teacher was understanding and knowledgeable when dealing with their individual problems. In her 1st semester especially, she was afraid of talking to American students and felt less comfortable in mainstream classes because of this. For Tina, Developmental Composition I&II were like “home,” and she was not afraid of making mistakes. As Costino and Hyon (2007) found, students desire to be in a class with other students to whom they feel close, and, in the students’ words, are “like me” or “like us” (p. 75). I was able to observe how a high level of comfort in the classroom increased her ability to practice and learn from her mistakes.

From these low-stakes environments, she not only gained reading and writing strategies, but she also had a lot of time to practice little by little. She was able to see these classes as a place where she could study “like a laboratory,” she said. Costino and Hyon (2007) remark that students use their ESL classes to provide support for their English language skills. In these classes, she engaged in different strategies to understand what would best help her to develop her own learning strategies. This shows that ESL students benefit from ESL classes in which they feel less nervous and take risks, challenging themselves while learning. Eventually, these classes allowed her to achieve strategies that she could apply in her mainstream classes.

Successfully Transferring Strategies to Mainstream Classes

To my surprise, Tina was able to successfully transfer strategies she had learned in Developmental Composition I&II and Second Year Composition to mainstream classes. The four strategies she benefited from were: top-down reading (PPPC), annotation, summarizing, and freewriting.

The preview, predict, preread, and code (PPPC) reading strategy changed the way that she thought about reading. Using this strategy, she was able to increase her reading speed as well as her understanding of the texts she read. She mentioned that she used this strategy in every class she took.

Annotation was the second strategy that she applied in mainstream classes. When annotating, she wrote comments, questions, or any thoughts she had, and she critically analyzed the texts she read. In other words, through annotation, she learned that critical thinking was necessary when reading. Annotation helped her to understand the texts in her classes, and it also increased her confidence toward her studies. Rubinstein (1967) found that writing is “not only a record of understanding, but an act of understanding” (p. 83). Therefore, writing processes such as annotation stimulated her reading process. Making a summary was another learning habit that she applied for Developmental Composition I&II, Second Year Composition, and in mainstream classes. This strategy enabled her to explain the readings concisely, which assisted her in writing papers based on the texts she read. She said she acquired the “ways Americans think.” By practicing summarizing, she learned how to write about the text using her own words and ideas, not just copying as she had done in her classes in China. Summarizing also helped her to increase her vocabulary. She discovered that instead of looking at a dictionary, looking for words or information online is faster and easier.

The last strategy Tina applied in her mainstream classes was freewriting. Initially in Developmental Composition I, Tina did not like to freewrite, because she had to keep writing even when she was out of ideas, which she found tiring. However, in Developmental Composition II, she began to enjoy freewriting as a way to think about whatever she wanted and to make discoveries. Freewriting became beneficial for her, especially when she was writing to agree or disagree with a certain viewpoint. These exercises enabled her to practice critical-thinking skills, as she considered two different viewpoints and decided in her own mind which one made the most sense. They also helped her learn how to put her thoughts and opinions onto paper in an expressive way, as she mentioned to me during our interviews. Mlynarczyk (2006) believes that students need to know how to express their ideas in personal and expressive language to gain academic language in a meaningful way.

Writing/Reading Support From Mainstream Teachers

Finally, seeing how much support Tina received from her mainstream teachers was a big surprise. Throughout her first 3 semesters at the university, she met teachers in mainstream classes who understood her struggles and helped her to perform better in these classes.

One example was the teacher in her humanities class during her 1st semester. Tina frequently had formal and informal meetings with the teacher to discuss papers and concerns she had with the class. She benefited from this one-on-one help with the teacher and felt less stress in the class as a result. Zamel and Spack (2006) found that ESL students are quick to admit the problems they have with a new culture and linguistic struggles. They also found that these students are glad to have help from instructors who can understand their problems. This teacher's understanding helped Tina to believe that she did not have to be as good as American students and that she was valued by the teacher.

Tina's 2nd-semester professor of philosophy is another example of a mainstream teacher who took a special interest in his ESL students. Philosophy was a completely new subject for her, and she found the readings to be very challenging at first. However, she emphasized that it was one of her favorite classes, because it gave her a chance to think about many new ideas. She felt this way because of how the teacher handled the class. She was often assigned to write a summary of the readings, and this allowed her to be ready for in-class discussions as she could think about the ideas in the text beforehand. Zamel and Spack (2006) state that "the opportunity to shape ideas in writing before a class discussion begins can reduce the resistance and fear ESOL learners may be experiencing" (p. 138). Unlike in other mainstream classes, there were a lot of class discussions, and Tina had many opportunities to speak with American students. Because of this, she really felt like a part of the class.

Implications

Based on my findings, three important implications have arisen:

1. Remedial classes are beneficial for all ESL students;
2. Collaboration between ESL and mainstream teachers is necessary for overall student success;
3. More research for case studies in academic literacy development is needed.

Remedial Classes (Developmental Composition I&II) Are Beneficial for All ESL Students

This case study research has shown that Developmental Composition I&II are highly beneficial for all ESL students. However, these remedial classes are offered only to freshman students who have just graduated from high school and who received the lowest scores on the English placement test. Given how beneficial they can be, ESL programs should offer these remedial classes to all ESL students. At four units each, which is 4 hours of class time per week, these classes allow students to spend a lot of time practicing and gaining academic literacy skills while getting personalized attention from their teacher. From my experience as a teaching assistant in another ESL class, I have seen that the greater amount of time available for students to practice in Developmental Composition I&II makes a big difference, and they come away with a better understanding of the strategies necessary to be successful readers and writers in English. In fact, it is the students who have completed these remedial classes who are the most successful in advanced ESL classes. I observed Tina's Second Year Composition class, and she looked confident and active. Acquiring academic literacy in a second language takes a lot of time and requires a lot of patience. After completing a year in these classes, students will be able to see their own improvement and become more confident in all their classes.

Collaboration Between ESL and Mainstream Teachers Is Necessary for Overall Student Success

To help ESL students achieve success, ESL teachers' support by itself is not enough. Teachers from other disciplines must be aware of the needs of non-native English-speaking students. Tina was fortunate enough to have caring mainstream teachers who understood the struggles of ESL learners. However, the same cannot be said of all members of faculty. Zamel and Spack (2006) say that mainstream teachers can be unprepared to deal with ESL students and need to find ways to understand their struggles. To do this, mainstream teachers should collaborate with ESL teachers by seeking their knowledge of ESL students' weaknesses and strengths, discussing how to encourage their learning. Zamel and Spack (2006) also find that instructors should engage in

investigating students' composing processes and literacy histories; examining the effect of our course content, assignments, and feedback on students' ongoing work; exploring what happens when writing becomes a means for risk taking, generating ideas, and engaging in intellectual work; and analyzing the logic of students' interpretations and language use. (p. 141)

It is important that teachers do not look at ESL students as weak learners. Rather, they should consider them as valuable students who can offer their own contributions in the classroom by providing different perspectives and knowledge.

More Research for Case Studies in Academic Literacy Development Is Needed

Relatively few case studies have been done on academic literacy development. Perhaps this is because they are time consuming, as many kinds of data have to be collected and analyzed. However, this case study revealed some important and surprising results that can be applied to improve ESL programs. Since this research focused on only one student, it would prove interesting to see the results of case studies performed on other students. Therefore, more case study research should be conducted in academic literacy development.

One solution could be that TESOL students (future ESL teachers) should conduct case studies in academic literacy development. In addition to learning teaching methods in class, future teachers would find it beneficial to investigate the real learning processes of ESL students.

Conclusion

When I conducted my first interview with Tina, she said, “I am glad that you are Asian,” and “I try to speak only to people who are Asian.” In our last interview, however, she said, “I am not afraid of speaking to non-Asian students anymore,” and “I feel like I belong to this university and have become a confident student.” Her dream career is now to work in the US instead of going back to China. This research has produced some eye-opening findings. As a teacher, I have come to a better understanding of how students learn and how teachers should approach that learning. I no longer feel surprised to see my students’ textbooks full of writings in their native language or to read awkward phrases that are due to direct translation from their mother tongue. Since I understand their struggles, I am better able to help them improve and am more patient with their slow progress. I am certain that continuing my research of other students’ learning processes will result in more findings.

Author

Naoko Takano received an MA in TESOL from San Francisco State University in 2012. While she was a graduate student, she started working at the American Language Institute at San Francisco State University. She taught there for 2 years, teaching academic speaking, listening, reading, writing, and grammar skills, and also mentoring a new intern as a teacher trainer. Her interests include academic literacy development and issues of nonnative English-speaking professionals in TESOL.

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