E-A-What?

Reflections on the (Rookie) Development of an English for Academic Purposes Course for
Elementary School Children in South Korea

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Abstract

This essay is the author’s reflection on her first experience in designing and implementing an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course—before, even, she knew what EAP was. A year prior to beginning her M.A. work at Colorado State University, the author proposed and developed a screenwriting course for advanced students at an English academy in South Korea in order to address students’ mounting boredom with the existing writing curriculum. This reflection describes the context, curriculum planning and design, materials development, implementation, and perceived successes and failures of the course.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes, second language writing, screenwriting, curriculum development.
Introduction

In the summer of 2010, I returned to Gwangju, South Korea for a second stint at teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). My pupils were charming, enthusiastic elementary school children, and as I had previously experienced a year of feeling inept and unprepared in an EFL classroom in another city in South Korea, I was intent on taking this second chance at teaching English to challenge myself to be a better teacher.

In an effort to achieve this goal, I developed a screenwriting course for the academy’s most advanced cohort of students. These students were completing their final year of elementary school before graduating to middle school, and most had been studying at this particular private English academy for several years. Their English language ability was exceptional, and it was clear to me after just one term as their reading teacher that they loved the stories they read in books and watched on television and in movies.

It was also clear that these students were fairly bored with the academy’s writing curriculum. I was told that they’d had a couple consecutive 3-month terms of writing to TOEFL prompts, preceded by a couple consecutive 3-month terms of a haphazardly-planned five-paragraph-essay class. During these courses, students never engaged in peer review, revision, or the sharing of their final work; their teachers were always their only audience, and the concept of writing as a process was fairly ignored. Of course, I had yet to engage in the disciplined study of the empirically-supported benefits of process work, peer review, revision, and authentic audiences; however, my own writing experiences served as testimony to the value of these stages in the writing process. I felt that these practices needed to be worked into the students’ writing curriculum.
While it was uncertain whether or not these writing classes were resulting in improvement in the students’ writing skills, what was certain was that the students were bored of taking these classes over and over again, and the teachers were bored of teaching them. It was in response to the need to both provide students with writing activities to facilitate their writing development, as well as to give students and teachers a fresh writing curriculum, that I pitched to the academy director a course titled *Introduction to Screenwriting*. My own background in creative writing led me to the conclusion that a screenwriting course would not only give students opportunities for different kinds of writing (for example, narrative writing to establish context and backstory, dialogue to give their characters voice, etc.), but I imagined that “making movies” would provide a creative outlet for their passion for cinema and stories and thus increase their motivation to write in English. I imagined students engaging in a couple months of process work in order to develop a movie idea, flesh out the story and characters, write up the script, perfect the dialogue, and—as a culminating project to conclude the 3-month term—pitch their movie idea via a Power Point presentation to all the students and teachers at the academy, thus providing them with the authentic audience that I believe to be so beneficial to maintaining motivation in writing.

**Curriculum Planning and Materials Development**

The school director approved my course development project, and it was with her excited anticipation—and my admitted ignorance to the scope of work to which I had committed myself—that I began doing research to inform the syllabus and workbook design. I ordered Christina Hamlett’s *Screenwriting for Teens: The 100 Principles of Screenwriting Every Budding Writer Must Know* (2006) to provide the content knowledge that I lacked, and once it arrived from overseas, the heavy realization that I actually had little idea how to proceed with a
project like this settled over me. Never having taken a course in screenwriting myself, I was unsure of which content was necessary to include, which was less crucial to the successful development of a movie idea, and then—once I had decided on content to fill the three months—what was the most logical organization of the lessons. I heavily consulted Hamlett’s text in the outlining and drafting of materials for the 3-month course, and after a couple months—right up to the printing deadline—the final draft was complete. Once the course workbook had been completed, sent to the printer, and shipped to the academy in hardcopy format, I was very happy and proud of the work that had gone into it. The curriculum design and materials development process was admittedly more time-consuming and challenging than I could have anticipated, but in retrospect, I understand that going through the process inefficiently taught me how to more efficiently proceed in the future.

Implementation & Reflections

Implementing the course was rife with little successes and what at the time felt like big failures. For starters, just a few days before the term was set to begin, several of the students who had been enrolled in the term switched to different English academies, leaving our class with only four students. Having so few students prompted the school director into considering closing the class, but luckily, she allowed the class to begin as planned. After only a couple class sessions, however, two things became evident: First, the language that I’d written into the workbook was too advanced for the students, and second, I’d been quite overzealous in my expectations for both what could be accomplished during class time (classes were only 40 minutes long), as well as what students could be expected to complete for homework. Because of this, students often did not have a firm understanding of the material before attempting homework, they often came to class sessions unprepared due to the amount of homework, and
their motivation and excitement for the course quickly waned. This not only interfered with the workshop-and-process-like nature of the course, but it significantly increased my frustration with both my students and myself.

The course ended with my students unprepared to pitch their movie ideas to the students and teachers at the academy, and my feeling rather embarrassed about my failed attempt to plan and implement the course that I’d felt so confident about during the planning stages. However, reading, coursework, and teaching experience that I have completed through my graduate studies at Colorado State University have helped me to retrospectively understand not only some of those perceived failures, but also to recognize my success at completing some of the necessary steps in the development of courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP). While I believe that I succeeded in noticing and addressing a student need through developing a writing course intended to stimulate student interest and provide opportunities for writing development, I understand better now the imperativeness of delivering content and instruction in language appropriate to students’ ability, the dangers of trying to cover too much material and exercises in a limited amount of time, and the importance of not taking perceived student apathy too personally.

One lesson looms taller than the rest, though, and it is a rather ironic one. As mentioned previously, the development of the course was partly rationalized as an attempt to increase student motivation. However, after only a few class sessions, I realized that instead of brainstorming, pitching, and designing a writing curriculum that would best serve the writing development of these particular students, I had created a course that I wanted to take. I had projected my own passion for creative writing onto these students, and thus not only were they probably not receiving the kind of writing instruction most pertinent and appropriate to their
English language contexts, but my frustration and offense at any hint of student apathy were most likely magnified and contributed to my perceptions of failure as a course developer and teacher. As a teacher of English as a second/foreign language and developer of future courses for English language learners, I now understand the necessity of assessing learners’ actual language needs, and of developing and delivering appropriate instruction in response to those real needs.