

Putting pens to paper - or fingers to keyboard: Practicing writing in legal English classes

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Abstract:

The presentation deals with developing students' writing skills within the newly-designed course of English for students of Law at Masaryk University. Since writing belongs to one of the most demanding and time consuming tasks, I would like to present several activities which involve group writing and peer-reviewing with the use of ICT. Ideally, employing technology and engaging the students into assessing should result in more efficient practice and immediate feedback, however, it is necessary to keep in mind possible drawbacks. I would like to share my classroom experience with discussion forums, Google Docs/wikis, and MU peer-review software, mentioning both advantages and disadvantages in specific tasks.

Key words: legal English, writing skills, assessment, peer review, ICT, Google Docs

1. Introduction

Masaryk University (MU) Language Centre has been involved in the IMPACT project¹ within which a number of courses are going to be innovated and all language exams across the University are going to be standardized. The course English for Lawyers will be affected in both of the mentioned directions. According to the needs analysis carried out among the former graduates and international law firms² the future changes ought to include more emphasis on developing the students' writing skills in a legal context. As writing is also a completely new part of the future standardized tests,³ legal English teachers at MU are looking for ways how to achieve efficient and practical ways of developing and assessing the students' writing skills. In this paper I would like to share experience with the use of ICT for written tasks, namely Google Docs, discussion forums and Peer Review software. I describe examples of tasks and compare benefits and drawbacks identified during the classroom practice.

¹ <http://impact.cjv.muni.cz/>

² More information on the needs analysis in Chovancová (2013).

³ More information on the innovated exams: Doupovcová, R., Šrámková, E: Výstupní testování v anglickém a německém jazyce PrF MU v Brně in Právní jazyk – od teorie k praxi, 3. – 4. 6. 2013, Olomouc.

2. Current situation

MU Language Centre at the Faculty of Law offers courses of English for legal purposes in all study programmes, i.e. Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral; however, this paper deals with the course of English for Lawyers which is intended for the students of five-year Master's programme.

English for Lawyers is a four-semester course in the first two years of study which is taught in 90-minute seminars once a week. The attendance is compulsory and the students are expected to participate actively in the lessons. There are about 20 students in each seminar group.

As far as the classrooms at the Faculty of Law are concerned, they are equipped with a PC and a dataprojector (or it is possible to ask for the equipment to be installed for the lesson). The majority of students come to classes with laptops or other Internet connected devices. The teacher can thus exploit various technology tools during the lessons.

There are seven teachers following the same syllabus of English for Lawyers. Up to now, there has been no common policy on developing the students' writing abilities; setting and assessing writing tasks have depended on individual teachers. So far the pieces of writing practiced in the lessons included mainly summaries, letters/emails, case studies or case briefs, nevertheless, the practice was not systematic and the tasks were not part of the final assessment.

3. Ways of practicing and assessing

We can find a number of ways of developing writing skills, e.g. in class or at home, individual or collaborative writing, on a piece of paper or into a Web environment, and three basic types of assessing the tasks – by the teacher, peer reviewing, and self-correction. I found it useful to employ the combination of all.

Although I prefer collaborative writing in class (groups of three or pairs) and individual writing for home I do not avoid setting group writing for homework; the students practice team work and, ideally, each of them can contribute more to the group writing at home because they have sufficient time to concentrate both on the language and the content compared to writing during the lesson within a time limit.

As far as assessment or feedback is concerned, Jakobs, Curtis, Braine & Huang (1998: 313) recommend “something of a middle path ... in which teacher, peer and self-directed feedback are judiciously

combined.” Even though the students prefer individual feedback made by teachers, there are studies (e.g. Mangelsdorf 1992, Rollinson 2005) which show that the students of ESL themselves consider peer reviewing as beneficial. I agree that different types of assessment can be advantageously combined; e.g. general class feedback and peer reviewing can be connected to giving guidance for self-correction.

When comparing class writing on a piece of paper and onto a screen, my experience shows that the students work faster on the keyboard. Obviously, an editor makes corrections easier and faster, but at the same time the students seem to feel more at ease at the keyboard and they tend to get more engaged in the task and be more creative. On the other hand, implementing technology brings drawbacks as well; the teacher needs to know how to work with ICT, there must be enough Internet devices, the technology need not work as expected, and the students might misbehave on the web. Technologies make the life in the classroom more colorful, however, there should always be a learning purpose behind their use and the teacher should always have a back up plan, which can be simply pieces of paper, if the technology fails.

4. Examples of ICT use

In the past three semesters I experimented with employing Google Docs, discussion forums and peer review software for developing students’ writing skills. There are more technologies which could be used in the classes; however, so far, I have found these three sufficient for practicing short writing tasks. I used Google Docs in the lessons, the peer-review software for home writing, and discussion forums for both.

4.1. Google Docs⁴

I decided for Google Docs mainly for practical reasons as this application is part of MU Information System and thus readily at hand for each student without any need of connecting to other web pages or creating special email accounts, however, their role may be substituted e.g. by wikis.

I use Google Docs for short writing in groups of three; with bigger groups students find it difficult (or are not very willing) to collaborate equally, with pairs there are too many persons to work on the same

⁴ Basic information on Google Docs e.g.: <http://www.avatarlanguages.com/teaching/googledocs.php>

document at the same time, i.e. if more than ten people edit the same document synchronously, the system need not work at all.⁵

I have employed Google Docs for the following tasks: summary of a case (as a follow-up activity), reviewing other students' writing, dictogloss,⁶ describing advantages and disadvantages of various issues (different group working on different topics).

When working in Google Docs the teacher needs to prepare a document to work on in advance. I usually write the instructions at the beginning and prepare space for each group depending on a specific task; if it is a summary, it can be an empty page or half a page for each group with the headings Group 1, Group 2, etc. In case it is reviewing a piece of writing, each team is provided with a source text, the same or different, sometimes it might be suitable to fill in information into a prepared table. I set the document to the mode "anybody knowing the link can edit" and before the beginning of the seminar or during the seminar, I sent an email with the link to the students. When it comes to the writing task, only one student in a group is to open the document and write the ideas of the whole group. I set a time limit within which the task is to be completed (usually maximum 20 minutes), however, I emphasize that the length can vary.

When students start writing, the teacher can easily monitor the work of each group on his/her computer, and thus see which groups have problems and provide immediate help. After the time limit for the task is over, I usually let students read other group's writing quickly, and in the meantime change the setting from "anybody knowing the link can edit" to "anybody knowing the link can view" to prevent students' misbehaving, e.g. writing "funny" texts when the teacher is projecting the results. It may be also useful to paste and copy the pieces which the groups have written on one page and highlight the parts that the teacher intends to comment on.

After this is prepared, I project the created pieces and give general feedback. Depending on the task and the time left, the teacher can comment not only on the accomplishing the tasks, but also on the lexis and

⁵ More about advantages and disadvantages of Google Docs in Deanna Mascle, "Teaching with Google Docs: The Good, Bad , and Ugly", retrieved from <http://masclemetawriting.blogspot.com/2012/07/teaching-with-google-docs-good-bad-and.html>

⁶ For the principles of dictogloss, see e.g. <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/knowledge-database/dictogloss>

grammar. The students themselves can be asked in groups to highlight any parts of another group's writing which they find either problematic, or successfully written.

Some groups produce a nearly professional piece of writing, some may write about three lines, they would evidently need more time because of either a lower level of English, or a lack of ideas and concentration. Sometimes the teacher can help by providing useful vocabulary for the task on the board.

4.2 Discussion forums

Discussion forums are generally a more static environment than Google Docs because the students are not able to write anywhere else outside their own answer, however, the students probably find forums more familiar than Google Docs.

Like with Google Docs I make use of the forums inside MU Information System and I prepare a seminar group forum (starting the forum and writing instructions) in advance and send an email with the link before or during the lesson.

I use discussion forums in class for pair work, for home tasks either for collaborative or individual work. I choose them for those activities which include practicing reviewing or commenting on other students' writing. A specific example can be writing abstracts for presentations: in the first stage the groups write their abstracts (one abstract per group) and in the following stage each student comments on abstracts according to their own choice, which means that they have to read and evaluate more texts to make a decision.

4.3 Peer Review

MU Language Centre developed their own software⁷ which facilitates the administration of peer reviewing. Writing and peer reviewing can be successfully used for home writing, nevertheless, in order to be efficient and meaningful, reviewing other students' work has to be practiced in advance within the lessons; as Rollinson (2005: 26) points out "some form of pre-training is crucial if the activity is to be profitable". Also Mangelsdorf (1992: 274) observes that peer-reviewing can effectively help the students only if it is "carefully structured".

⁷ <http://peer-review.civ.muni.cz/>

The following is an example of a series of activities leading to the first peer reviewing. The area of practice can be e.g. formal letters. The students are first exposed to the rules or a model piece of writing, they may practice useful phrases or collocations. They are given the context (this can be reading, speaking, listening, or video activity) for which they are asked to write the particular piece of writing. In order to evaluate how the students are able to perform, the teacher can use group writing in class with Google Docs or discussion forums. The students are given not only the instructions for the writing, but also the criteria for assessing the writing (or they can develop the criteria themselves when discussing the rules of that genre). After the groups finish their writing, they are asked to review the work of another group, which can be practically achieved by assigning the groups numbers 1, 2, ... and then assigning them the group +1 for reviewing (the last group reviews number one). The review is written in the same environment (Google Docs or discussion forums). The teacher monitors the work and at the end analyzes both the original pieces of writing and reviews with the class.

After the students know how to review effectively, the teacher can set peer reviewing for home task. The software will take care of the administration; the teacher sets the task, the number of text for reviewing and the deadlines for uploading the work and the review. The system arranges the emails with the link for uploading the pieces of writing, shuffles the texts and assigns the given number (I set two) of pieces for reviewing, sends emails with the link for downloading them and uploading the reviews, and finally returns the reviews to the original authors. The teacher can see the uploaded work and gives class feedback at the end.

5. Writing within the new syllabus

The above mentioned tools are examples which can be used for developing the students' writing skills; nevertheless they are only means which should lead to a given goal. The language department at the Faculty of Law has designed a new syllabus reflecting the needs of the students; writing is only one of the skills covered in the course of English for Law. As Chovancová (2013) points out "it appears to be important to maintain a reasonable balance between legal English skills and some basic legal content" and "the course should help the students to get prepared to tackle particular challenges in their future professional careers."

A successful syllabus is a matter of years, the designed activities and students' achievements need to be evaluated and re-evaluated after each course (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Good practice with

developing the learners' writing tasks will also develop gradually; however, performing these tasks also have positive side effects in the fact that they generate teaching material. The immediate feedback after writing in class can include the revision of grammar points, or useful collocations or vocabulary which the task produced. Moreover, authentic examples of students' writing can be also used for the future activities, e.g. for illustrating common mistakes or problems.

The aim of the innovated syllabus will be to prepare the students for peer reviewing from the first semester to enable them to develop their own writing skills more efficiently. As Rollinson (2005: 29) observes "by giving the students practice in becoming critical readers, we are at the same time helping them towards becoming more self-reliant writers, who are both self-critical and who have the skills to self-edit and revise their own writing."

6. Conclusion

As technologies become part of our daily life, and mainly part of our students' lives, they should not be avoided in the classroom. They can make the teacher's and students' work richer, more efficient and authentic, however, the teacher must carefully think about the way how to employ them meaningfully. And at same time the students should be also aware of what the purpose of their task is.

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