



Using Rhetorical Flexibility to Bridge Advanced Reading/Writing/Grammar with English 101

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By successfully completing Level 5 of the five-level intensive English program at the Applied English Center (AEC), students can fulfill the university's ESL requirement and exit the IEP. As a new coordinator to AECR 151, Level 5 Reading/Writing/Grammar, I felt unsure of where students were going after they left the IEP. I knew very little about the English Department and even less about English 101. What were students being asked to do? Were they struggling? Were they thriving? Did we prepare them well?

To get a better sense of this, I met with Sonya Lancaster, Associate Director of Freshmen-Sophomore English. Through our discussion, I quickly realized that our students were only being equipped with a specific range of English skills: skills that prepared them to write structurally and grammatically sound essays based on prompts that were given to them. What English 101 requires students to do is to use language to think outside of the box and to use *rhetorical flexibility*. I was new to this term, but I have now embraced this as one of the central pieces of our L5 writing curriculum.

Rhetorical Flexibility

What *rhetorical flexibility* requires is for students to write *differently*, to use independent and creative thinking in their writing process. It asks students to engage with writing in ways that they have not before, to take a thesis and to express that message in modes other than the traditional essay. For example, one possible assignment in English 101 is to submit a rhetorical analysis of an advertisement or even a restaurant menu. Students must not only describe the advertisement or menu, but also give an analysis of why the creator made the choices that they did. A subsequent assignment is then to create their own *multi-modal project* where they have to use a visual medium, such as a zine or a webpage, to convey a message and then write an accompanying paper that explains why they made specific choices in their design. As I have tutored international students who are taking English 101, this jump from description to analysis is indeed a significant one.

Our students get stellar English language instruction in foundational English in the Intensive English Program's (IEP's) Levels 1-4. Our Level 5 students who have come through Level 4 Reading/Writing/Grammar know how to write academically. They know what is expected in an academic setting, including how to write a research paper. Given this level of ability as they enter Level 5, I began to think of ways to address *rhetorical flexibility* in order to prepare them for the writing they would be asked to do at the next level.

The first move toward *rhetorical flexibility* was for students to choose their own topic. The first round of writing has a theme, but they must choose their own writing topic based on that theme. At this point, I find that students fall into one of three categories: those who relish the chance to write about whatever they choose, those who need a little encouraging and coaching to find a topic, and those who seem to be deeply uncomfortable with the choice.

As is standard in IEP writing classes, the students move through the pre-writing and outlining stage, pieces of the process that students struggle to devote enough time to. Comments I often hear are some form of, "I think of my ideas as I'm writing my paper. Why do I have to write them down before I write?" In general, these steps are challenging for students to slow down and give thought and time to, which is why we take time out of class to model and allow for practice.

After outlining, students submit their first draft through SafeAssign and start the self-editing process. The intention is for them to learn the process of knowing themselves as writers so that they can be more self-sufficient once they leave the AEC. They are also required to make an appointment at either the Point² or the University's Writing Center and must arrive at the appointment with something they have already identified as an area of concern, which creates an interactive dialogue rather than a one-way interaction where the consultant simply tells the students what is wrong with their paper. As with the previous steps, this is uncomfortable for some, and they revert back to the habit of handing over their paper for editing. Some, however, have learned the value of self-editing and are making excellent use of this resource. One student was so surprised that this was an

² The Point is an academic resource center created by the AEC to help ESL students with specific questions about classwork, grammar, vocabulary, and/or the four language skills.

available service that she said, “Can I go as many times as I want?” The hope is that this will become so comfortable for them, that it will become a habit as they write papers in the future.

While students are engaging in this step, their teachers are making comments on the students’ papers. I encourage teachers to give general, narrative feedback in each of the categories from the final draft rubric, highlighting areas students need to give attention to as they edit. I, personally, try not to give my comments back to the students until later in the week, to give students time to wrestle with their papers on their own before seeing my comments.

Toward the end of the process, students have received comments from their teacher and comments from the writing consultant and will hopefully have engaged with their paper several times. Students then make final changes to their paper and submit their final drafts. The teacher then grades the papers in greater detail and returns them the following week.

The last piece of the writing process has been that students reflect on their writing after each round, i.e., after going through the steps. With all of the pieces of their writing process in hand, students are asked questions related to how they felt about the particular type of writing, how the writing process went for them, if there were steps that needed more attention, and which grammar concepts were mastered and which were not. As with the previous steps, this is meant to lead students to greater self-awareness and independence as writers so that they can feel more confident with the *language* part of their writing and can then focus their attention on addressing issues of *rhetorical flexibility*.

The results have been incredibly positive. Students’ progress is more evident. They become familiar and comfortable with writing as a journey that requires and benefits from time and attention. They write with more enthusiasm. One student reported that he “wrote with passion” because he was engaging with a topic that he was deeply interested in. Students also appear more confident with their own strengths as writers and in their ability to write effectively in their future courses. They have also become comfortable with being asked to write in ways that they had not before. I emphasize that they may be given a task that is unfamiliar, but that by using

the writing process and asking for help when needed, that they can handle these unconventional writing assignments.

What has been clear, though, is that students fall into distinct categories, as mentioned earlier. Some are ready for freedom and new challenges; others are able to embrace *rhetorical flexibility* with guidance from their instructors; and others struggle to thrive with the ambiguity. There were two particular students who fell into the last category in fall semester 2016 and had to repeat in the spring; with the extra time, they were able to understand how to think more flexibly about their writing and eventually thrived as writers.

Teaching Rhetorical Flexibility in Four Rounds

Round 1: Determination

Students write a traditional essay around the theme of determination. The process of choosing their own topic related to the theme begins to challenge students to think more freely and independently.

Round 2: Opinion Paper

Students write a traditional essay explaining a weighty opinion that they hold. Again, they are asked to expound on a personal opinion of their choosing.

Round 3: Formal Proposal and OpEd

This round of writing is where the bulk of the *rhetorical flexibility* takes place. Students take the topic they chose for their opinion paper and change the format. They first write a formal proposal for a formal audience that has a 275-word limit with specific formatting guidelines. This assignment has seemed to challenge students the most, at least in the initial understanding of why they were writing in this way. There is usually a great deal of discussion about how to take the topic they used for the last paper and change the focus to fit a new audience. (One side benefit of this assignment is that students learn specific formatting tools such as underlining and bulleting, tools some of our students had never used before.)

They then change the format again to write an OpEd, similar to what they would see in the University Daily Kansan, the University student newspaper. They must change their audience from a formal audience to their campus peers, thus altering their vocabulary and grammar choices. (After writing the OpEd, many students

have commented that they now feel empowered and capable of writing something to go in the campus newspaper.)

Round 4: Argument Paper

Students take their Opinion Paper and add more substance to it. They first write an annotated bibliography on their sources. Then they add sources and more detail to their paper as well as a counterargument. This idea came from observing that other KU courses require students to do a final paper that consists of a revision of a previous paper.

Rounds two through four all revolve around the same topic; therefore, by the end of the semester, students have produced four different types of writing based on the same topic and thesis.

Conclusion

The collaborative relationship with the English Department has been invaluable as I have tried to mold the writing curriculum to equip outgoing IEP students for what comes next. I view Level 5 as a transition level, with one foot in the IEP and one in the English Department; the hope is that students catch a glimpse of what is expected at the next level and, at the very least, that a bit of the mystery will have been taken out of the nontraditional writing assignments that they will be asked to do. Additionally, by taking students through a writing workshop model that emphasizes self-awareness and independence, students will be empowered to tackle any assignment as confident writers.

The conversation between our two departments continues; not only am I learning what students will find as they take English 101, Dr. Lancaster and the other English professors have benefited from knowing more about what kind of English preparation students leave the AEC with. This mutually beneficial relationship can only serve to strengthen our students' skills and ready them for what lies ahead.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)