Communicating writing tasks effectively: Assignment sheets as pedagogical tools

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The assignment stage of the writing process requires teachers to define the task and clarify expectations to students in concise, comprehensible terms to ensure that learners can write with direction and confidence. To help teachers achieve this goal, this article recommends the use of assignment sheets to enhance teacher-student communication and shows how these documents can be used in class for a variety of pedagogical purposes. Beyond the basic aim of clarifying task requirements, the author shows how they can be used as a heuristic for teachers, as a reference tool for students, as a means to advance learners' composition metalanguage, and as a resource to bridge the gap between teacher and student expectations.

作文指導の課程において教師が宿題を出そうとする際には、学習者が自分の進むべき方向性を理解し、自信を持ってタスクを行えるようにするために、教師は学生に対してタスクの内容を明示し、期待する内容を簡潔かつ理解しやすいように伝えなければならない。これを達成するための一助として、本論では、宿題シートを使用して学生と教師間のコミュニケーションを促進し、授業でそれがどう使用されるかを示す。また、この宿題シートがタスクの明示化という基本的な目的を超えて、様々な用途に使用できることを示す。その用途とは、教師にとっての指導指針、学生にとっての参考ツール、学習者が作文をする際に使えるメタ言語を増やすための手段、そして教師と学生間の思惑のずれを正すためのリソース、等である。

Many years ago as a graduate student in linguistics, I taught English composition as part of my assistantship, which involved taking a course entitled *Teaching Freshman English*. Of the many topics we covered, one was about creating assignment sheets: a detailed 2-3 page description that outlined our expectations and thoroughly explained each part of the writing task. This document was taken seriously in my teacher's course to the point that it was referred to as a contract between the student and teacher to make sure that both parties understood what the purpose, content, and form of the writing task would entail.

Now, when I recall this contract approach to teacher planning, I see how culturally inappropriate it is for the writing classes I teach here in Japan, not to mention how tedious it would be for foreign language learners to wade through pages of explanatory detail. So once I moved from teaching L1 to L2 composition, I largely abandoned this practice and instead focused on clarifying my assignment expectations through more hands-on approaches such as genre analysis, assessment rubric application, and peer review.

Yet despite giving students plenty of practice with sample texts that model what I want them to do, I have realized that some learners need more explicit guidance as to how they should proceed through the writing process. This is especially true when students are writing in new genres, such as research essays and other academic papers. Rather than inferring task requirements through model text analysis and the like, an assignment sheet speaks directly to the student. Of course, this

kind of direct communication can take place through spoken interaction during class, but over the years, I have found that defining a writing task through a formal document can be an extremely efficient and resourceful instructional tool, enabling students to write with direction and confidence.

Rationale

In this article, I am recommending the use of assignments sheets to communicate *formal* writing tasks to students, in other words tasks designed to assess writing performance and that involve a multi-step writing process with at least one revision cycle (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 162). Specifically, an assignment sheet delineates the task from start to finish, stating assignment goals, the prompt, the text type or rhetorical mode, essay structure or components, as well as length and deadlines. As part of the planning process, a teacher needs to decide these task features in terms of her particular group of learners, which involves anticipating difficulties and challenges that students might face as they write. If not properly thought through and communicated clearly by the teacher, students can misunderstand what is expected of them, which is frustrating for both and results in wasted efforts.

Although conveying writing tasks to learners is a basic responsibility of any writing teacher, there is little guidance on this aspect of classroom communication in the L2 writing literature. From a survey of teacher resource guides on L2 writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Harmer, 2004; Hyland, 2003), only Ferris and Hedgcock's provides examples of assignment sheets. In their guide, the discussion briefly introduces factors teachers should consider when constructing a formal writing task, and they refer to Kroll and Reid (1994) and Reid and Kroll's (1995) often-cited investigation into the many factors relevant to designing effective writing prompts.

In contrast, four well-known L1 composition teacher guides devote entire chapters to developing formal writing assignments (Conners & Glenn, 1995; Gottschalk & Hjortshoj, 2004; Lindemann, 2001; White, 1999), instructing teachers on everything from conceptualizing, preparing, and sequencing writing assignments to composing assignment sheets that are clear, effective, and accessible to learners. These L1 guides acknowledge the difficulty of clarifying teacher expectations to novice writers, and considering

that differences in cultural background, educational experience, and linguistic proficiency are typical characteristics of L2 writing classrooms (among students and/or between student and teacher), pedagogical tools that aim to enhance communication between teacher and learner are bound to be worthwhile.

Assignment sheets: purposes and functions

Assignment sheets are basic but valuable tools that synthesize class work and instruct students regarding the features of the task. Beyond this basic function, these documents can also be used to accomplish several other pedagogical goals.

As a means to express teacher expectations, the assignment sheet (AS) can fill an often unspoken gap in communication between teacher and learner—particularly true in L2 contexts where English teachers cannot easily make assumptions regarding learners' literacy backgrounds. Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) show through a questionnaire- and interview-based investigation that L1 literacy can vary from student to student, and we cannot assume that all Japanese learners have received a standardized instruction in writing. Consequently, teachers need to find out from students what writing experience they do have—both in the L1 and L2—in order to help learners draw from their L1 writing expertise and bridge the gap to L2 composition. When teachers introduce a new assignment, the AS can help elicit this sort of dialogue within the context of a given writing task. For example, after reviewing the basic components of a new assignment, I often have students do a short, question-prompted free-write that addresses their writing experience as it relates to the assignment at hand. As a more general resource, I have also conducted writing diagnostics at the start of the course that require students to describe both their L1 and L2 writing experience in terms of what writing assignments they have completed in high school and through exam preparation.

Aside from different literacy backgrounds, sometimes students can misinterpret an instructor's expectations (Basham, Ray, & Whalley, 1993; Conner & Carrell, 1993). Based on a NES freshman composition course, Nelson (1990) reports on a series of case studies that involve mismatched intentions between teachers and students about writing assignments. What is surprising in many of the examples is how disparate the views of students and teachers are in terms of writing purposes and expectations.

In my experience, I have assigned a summary-response paper, which asks students to start with a one-paragraph article summary followed by a multi-paragraph response to the article's ideas. Despite carefully reviewing two samples in class, I received some essays on the reading topic but unrelated to the class article, a long detailed summary only of the reading, and other papers where students copied the original opinions and artfully pasted them into a response section. An AS can complement such class work by explicitly reinforcing the purpose and task features and help reduce the likelihood of multiple interpretations.

Thus, considering the possibilities for miscommunication, a major advantage of the AS is its immediacy. The audience for the AS is the students themselves, and the rhetorical situation is framed in terms that address them directly. This can help some learners recognize the task requirements more easily than through model essay analysis or inference-based exercises alone. Assignment sheets explicitly instruct students to connect class work to their own text production, and teachers can highlight this connection by referring to the AS as needed throughout the writing process. Further, as teachers comment on student papers, they can point back to the AS in their written feedback in order to highlight discrepancies between the learner's text and task expectations. In this way, the AS becomes a useful reference tool.

The AS also contains important composition metalanguage that will be used between teachers and students throughout the task sequence and the overall course. Terms such as *draft*, *revision*, *development*, *reaction* may be new to students in English and warrant time spent on clarification. At the end of one of my writing courses, I can remember reviewing the contents of a student's final portfolio, and when I asked if he had included both the first and final drafts for all course assignments, he looked at me blankly and said, "What's a draft?" Students need a vocabulary for talking about writing, and an AS is an excellent tool to introduce and review basic composition-related terms. Equally important as composition terminology are "strategy words" (Conners & Glenn, 1995) that typically appear in essay prompts, such as *analyze, describe, explain, justify*. These words define the essay's rhetorical purpose and are key to understanding how to respond to a writing prompt and to organize one's ideas. If not understood correctly, learners' efforts can easily be misdirected.

Finally, for teachers, preparing an AS functions as a heuristic in that it helps clarify their thinking about learning goals and how to best accomplish them. Through the process of preparing a written AS, teachers must consider the writing task from several perspectives and then articulate their ideas in concrete, task-specific terms. Thinking through an assignment cycle down to the seemingly minor details leads teachers to make a number of decisions in advance *before* students begin to write, an effort that greatly helps anticipate pitfalls and avoid frustrations later.

Preparing the assignment sheet

Minimally, an assignment sheet should include the following components (see Reid and Kroll, 1995, for more comprehensive advice regarding writing task design as well as Lindemann's, 2001, p. 220-221, heuristic of question prompts to help teachers write their own assignments).

Assignment goals: A good assignment is based on learning objectives commonly understood between teacher and student. Which writing skills and strategies will be developed through this task? What is the class working towards improving as they write this essay? How does this particular assignment connect to the overall course goals? Answers to these questions clarify why the teacher is assigning a given task.

Writing topic: The writing topic, or prompt, introduces the theme and the purpose for writing. The first step in preparing a good prompt is to define the rhetorical problem that students will solve (Lindemann, 2001). Essentially, a rhetorical problem engages students intellectually on a number of levels so they are not pursuing a meaningless exercise. For example, writing tasks such as "My favorite sport" or "Write a letter applying for a job" or "Describe your bedroom" have no purpose beyond just having students write; however, "Describe your room and explain how various details in it reflect your personality and habits" is a prompt that introduces a rhetorical problem (Irmscher, as cited in Conners and Glenn, 1995, p. 57). Here, students are given a reason to write and must assess their relationship with the reader and subject in order to make their description interesting and informative (Lindemann, 2001). These layers of decision-making make the task meaningful for the writer.

Essay requirements: An AS should specify the essay's components, steps in the assignment cycle, deadlines, and length. The prompt typi-

cally indicates the rhetorical mode or genre, but it's helpful to further clarify how an argument or theme should develop. For example, maybe you want students to include a summary paragraph, a certain number of reasons or cited sources to support the thesis, a definition of a key concept, or a counter-argument—whatever information you expect to see in the students' writing should be included on the AS. Next, specify the steps in the assignment cycle so students can see the overall process from start to finish, including due dates. It is important that students understand how each preparation task contributes to the final essay. Students will invariably ask how long their papers should be. Even if you do not have a firm expectation in mind, in my experience, it's best to at least give a page range. Length indicates how much content they need to generate, which in turn spells out how much time they need to spend on the homework. No guidelines in this area can lead to misinterpretations in topic scope and depth.

Evaluation: This section ties the assignment to teacher evaluation. It recasts the assignment's expectations into evaluative terms making it transparent to students how their essays will be graded. By addressing evaluation up front at the time of assigning the task, students can better understand what they need to do in order to write a successful essay.

Sample essay: Attaching a model essay to the assignment sheet is another way to further clarify an effective, appropriate response. Teachers can save successful examples of students' work for future classes or simply write a response themselves. With a sample essay on hand, the teacher can refer back and forth between the AS and sample, highlighting each requirement. This process greatly helps students envision the assignment description in final composition form. In the Appendix for this article, a student essay is included with the AS, and although not a "perfect" text, it gives students a clear idea of what kind of response meets the assignment criteria within the realm of their abilities.

Finally, regarding the overall AS document, it's best to use transparent, jargon-free language. In the sample AS (see Appendix), professional terminology like *prompt*, *task*, *genre*, *rubric* were all substituted with more learner-friendly terms in order to avoid making the essay instructions unnecessarily complicated. At the same time, too much detail can discourage students and shut down communication. When students read the AS, they need to feel like the task at hand is manageable and that the document is pointing them in the right direction. Above all, the AS must be fully comprehensible to your students.

Processing the assignment sheet in class

Once the writing assignment has been prepared, it needs to be reviewed and discussed with students. With some creativity, this can be done interactively in class. Below are a few suggestions based on the sample AS provided in the Appendix, which was designed for an intermediate-level, reading-based writing course.

Introducing the assignment sheet

Here the aim is to review the contents of the AS and to ensure students fully understand the expectations for the task. Rather than just reading through the document in class, teachers can employ any number of interactive reading exercises such as timed scanning exercises, jigsaw tasks, T/F questions, quizzes, or some other comprehension check type exercise. The AS is a reading in itself and can be processed actively like any other written text.

Deconstructing the prompt

An important part of reviewing the AS is deconstructing the prompt, or in other words, identifying exactly what students are being asked to do and distinguishing the various parts of the writing task. The prompt for the sample AS is quite simple and is phrased as a question already, but for prompts that describe a situation or that are expressed as statements, it can be helpful for learners to rephrase the central task as a question and in their own words. For example, "Write an essay that discusses whether it is worthwhile to study abroad or not" could be rephrased as "Is study abroad important for students?" or "Do I think studying abroad is useful or not?" For more complex prompts, asking students, "What is this assignment asking me to do?" and having them list the required tasks helps to confirm understanding. Overall, reformulating the prompt as a question or series of questions helps learners distill the task down to a direct, response-oriented idea.

Addressing composition metalanguage

In order to participate in the composition classroom and to advance their own knowledge of the writing process, students need to develop a

metalanguage for talking about writing. The AS is an important resource for this key vocabulary. Looking at the sample AS, we see strategy terms like *summarize*, *respond/response*, *synthesize*, *explain*, *justify*. Do students know exactly what these terms mean? One way to make sure is to prepare a matching exercise in which students connect the word with a sentence or short paragraph that illustrates it. As a follow-up, teachers can have students find applications of the term in the model essay by cross-referencing it with the AS, such as identifying sentences that function as justification.

Other terms, like *draft*, *revision*, *development*, and *support*, are used throughout a writing course regardless of the specific assignment, especially for evaluative purposes in teacher written feedback, on assessment rubrics, and in peer review. Teachers can familiarize their students with this language by cross-referencing the terms between the AS and evaluation rubric. For example, one of the assignment goals on the sample AS is "to respond to the article's ideas with your own opinion." How is this goal expressed in evaluative terms on the corresponding evaluation rubric? By searching for parallels between the evaluation rubric and the AS, students gain practice using composition language while at the same time, assignment requirements are being reinforced.

Analyzing model essays

Sample texts are reviewed in writing classrooms for a variety of purposes. When analyzed in terms of assignment expectations, learners make a direct connection between task description and final product. For example, model essays can be used to identify essay components cited on the AS (e.g., "Where is the article summary?" "What are the writer's opinions about living alone?") and to practice evaluation based on the AS's learning goals (e.g., Is the summary section complete? Are the main ideas fully developed?). Ultimately, this cross-referencing reinforces the information on the AS and clarifies task features.

Conclusion

Naturally, teachers want to avoid misunderstandings that can cause setbacks in the writing process or undermine an assignment's original objectives. Conveying instructor expectations clearly and succinctly is not easy, and doing so via a written document is much more effective than delivering the details verbally in bits and

pieces or through a brief rundown on the board. In my experience, students appreciate having a written document to refer to, and they often have the AS in hand when asking me questions about the homework. In order to improve teacher-student communication, assignment sheets can serve multiple roles, not only as documents that delineate task requirements, but also as pedagogical tools that reinforce and further students' composition knowledge.

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Appendix

Sample Assignment Sheet

Assignment Goals

- to summarize two news articles
- to respond to the article's ideas with your own opinion
- to synthesize your opinions with the article's ideas into a multi-paragraph response essay

Writing Topic

During their university years or soon after graduation, many students begin living on their own. This can be a difficult period of transition, and according to the articles we read, loneliness and feelings of depression are more common in people who live alone. On the other hand, moving away from your family is an important step to becoming an independent adult.

Do you think it's better to live alone or with your family? Why? Write a response essay in which you explain your reasons and justify them with information from the class readings, examples and/or personal experience.

Essay Requirements

Length:
- 2-3 pages
- 12 point font, double-spaced

Structure:
- Paragraph 1 = Introduction
- Paragraph 2 = Article summary
- Paragraph 3, 4, 5, etc. = Response paragraphs
- Final paragraph = Conclusion

Due dates:
- Article summary paragraph: due May 10
- Article annotations: due May 17
- Essay draft: due May 24
- Final essay: due June 7

Evaluation

Like the other essay assignments, this essay is worth 20 points. See evaluation form below for more detail.

Essay Evaluation Form

Criteria	Score				
Content • Is there an accurate summary of the readings? • Does the essay express the writer's opinions in relation to the readings?	5	4	3	2	1
Organization • Is the entire essay well-organized and easy to follow? • Are paragraphs properly structured?	5	4	3	2	1
Development • Are the writer's ideas explained fully? • Does the writer use information from the readings, examples and/or personal experience to explain the main ideas?	5	4	3	2	1
Language • Is the language clear and correct? • Are ideas explained with effective vocabulary and varied sentence structure?	5	4	3	2	1

Sample Response Essay

The merit and demerit of living alone

When people graduate from high school and enter a university or get a job, some of them begin to live alone. Many of my friends are living alone now. Some people had to leave their home because it's too far to go to the school or their place of work from their home. Others did not have to live alone, but they start to live alone because they want to live on their own.

In the two articles, there are some bad points of living alone. For example, the number of elderly living alone is increasing, so it can causes some social problems. Furthermore, living alone can make people feel depressed and isolated, not only for elderly but also for young working-age adults. The articles show only bad points of living alone, but I think there are also some good points of living alone. According to the article of "Will living alone make you depressed?," people who tend to feel depressed are more likely to live alone because of their temperament. However, I wonder if it is true. I wonder if living alone is equal to loneliness.

I have never experienced living alone because I do not have to leave home. I can go to the university easily from home. It takes about only about 45 minutes. I do not want to leave home and live alone, because I have no confidence in living on my own. However, I can understand the good points of living alone. My friends who live alone can cook. They said that they could not cook before starting to live alone, but they got used to cook. I want to be able to cook, but I do not have chance to challenge and practice cooking because my parents are good at cooking. Those friends need to cook something to eat, but I do not need to cook. If a person lives alone, he or she must manage living expenses, do house-keeping such as cooking, cleaning, washing laundry and so on. It is hard, but it will become good experience. Living alone can help people to become independent. I do not have experience of living alone and I do not want so much to leave home, but sometimes I think I need to be more independent.

One of the reasons why I do not want to live alone is that I do not feel isolated. I can agree that living alone make people depressed. However, I do not understand enough the idea that the depression-prone are more likely to live alone. If a person who is depressed begins to live alone, he or she will feel more isolated and lonely. I cannot understand why people who tend to be depressed take the trouble to live alone. There may be people who return their parents' home because they are depressed and lonely. As I said, living alone has some good points. However, if you feel depressed or isolated, you should not live alone. To leave home and live alone become a good experience to be independent, but sometimes people must need somebody's help. When I am depressed, I want to be alone at first, but after then I want someone to be with me, so I cannot understand enough the idea.

I have lived with my family since I was born, and nobody has leave home to live alone, so if I begin to live alone, I may feel lonely and be depressed. However, I do not think living alone is equal to loneliness. There are many people who enjoy their life although they live alone. One of my friends is living alone though her family live in same city. She wanted to become independent, so she decided to live alone. She enjoys her lifestyle. She sometimes feels lonely, but she says she does not think about returning home. Not only her, I have friends who enjoy living alone. They can use their time as they want, so they enjoy their free life. Of course there are many people living alone who are lonely and depressed. Especially, elderly people living alone may be lonely and anxious about their life. However, I do not want to define living alone as negative mean, such as lonely life.

Living alone has both good points and bad points. If you start to live alone, you may feel lonely. It can make you depressed. However, you can have good experiences and learn many things from living alone. You need to prepare your meals, wash your laundry, and clean your room on your own. You must also manage your life budget. You feel those works are too hard to get done successfully, but you will get used to the cycle of living alone. You can find that how your parents work hard for your family and how your family is important. When you can get used to live alone, you will become more independent than ever. However, you should keep in mind that living alone is possible to lead negative feeling and cause some problems, especially to elderly. We should take care of people living alone who feel lonely or isolated. I thought living alone was lonely and very difficult for me, so I have never thought that I wanted to live alone. However, I get interested in living alone through thinking of good points of living alone. We should consider both good points and bad points of living alone.