Teaching information literacy to EFL writing classes

Susan Gilfert
Kwansei Gakuin University

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This paper argues for the importance of teaching EFL students how to build information literacy strategies and skills. Literacy has many forms, most of which have been learned by the time a student enters university. EFL students have a variety of writing assignments in their university English classes. Not only do EF/SL writers need critical thinking skills to write academically, they also need to be able to analyze, organize and synthesize information from other sources for research. Beginning researcher-students are often daunted by the mysterious box that libraries and other information sources can seem to be. This paper describes a model information-literacy course, and presents a resource-evaluation checklist.

本稿では、英語学習者へどの様に情報応用能力（リテラシー）の構築方法を教える重要性を論じている。情報の応用方法（リテラシー）は、様々な形を持っており、それらの多くは、大学への入学時に学ばれている。英語学習者は、大学の英語の授業で多種多様のライティング課題をこなす。英語学習者だけでなく、研究論文を書く上では、他の研究資料からも分析しまとめ、総合的に考え書くスキルが必要である。研究を始めたばかりの学生達は、図書資料や他の情報資料が不思議な箱に見えてしまい、怯んでしまうことがしばし起る。本稿では、情報の応用方法（リテラシー）のレッスンプランについて述べチェックリストを掲載している。

Today's students confront a staggering variety of information sources. Books, television, radio, interviews with experts, webpages, audiofiles and other sources move in and out of their attention span. How can students determine which sources are useful, reliable, and academically sound? Every student needs to employ critical thinking skills in addressing this task. They need to learn to select, gather and use information in the pursuit of their studies—not just credit for an immediate class, but also for the future tasks. Building information literacy strategies and skills should be a focus for every university professor.

Information literacy and the research process

All students in higher education are required to demonstrate skill in conducting and reporting scholarly research. Information literacy is an essential component of this process, and influences students' success in tackling such assignments throughout all stages of the process. A short review of information literacy might be useful. According to Bruce (2003), "The spectrum of literacy includes:

- Alphabetic literacy –writing name
- Functional literacy –reading and writing
- Social literacy –communication in a cultural context
- Information literacy –critical location, evaluation and use of information
- Digital information literacy –application of information literacy in the digital environment"

The last two are the focus of the course described below. By the time students are in higher education, the first three points are implicitly mastered.

As a teaching librarian, my experience leads me to believe that many university professors expect their students from any language background to have mastered the final two as well. Alas, such is not always the case. Many librarians in college and university libraries find themselves as *de facto* writing tutors for students who never learned how to write academic papers, yet received a research assignment from a professor who assumed that the student was already information literate in all the points above. Prucha, Stout and Jurkowitz (2005) note "Calls for the collaboration of librarians and English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors abound in library literature (Baron & Strout, 2001; Ormondroyd, 1989; Feldman, 1989; Kahmi-Stein, 1998; Conteh-Morgan, 2001), although less is written about the nature or results of that collaboration." (p. 18) In my case, the collaboration is within myself, as both a teaching librarian and a university-level ESL writing instructor.

What is information literacy?

This section discusses in further depth the final two points from Bruce above. The Association of College and Reference Libraries (ACRL) presents this definition: "Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to 'recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information'" (ACRL, 2000, p. 2). ACRL further argues that universities not only establish the requirements but also possess the resources to develop lifelong learners through the use of high instructional standards.

I use a librarian's definition here because my philosophical approach to information literacy is from the perspective of library science. Another definition of information literacy incorporates knowledge of computer operations and usage, e.g., "a new liberal art that extends from knowing how to use computers and access information to critical reflection on the nature of information itself, its technical infrastructure, and its social, cultural and even philosophical context and impact" (Shapiro & Hughes, 1996, para. 13).

Native speakers clearly benefit from information literacy training, becoming more effective and efficient information consumers. Knowing how to search for and evaluate information becomes a tool for university assignments, and later, for all other information needs. If native speakers benefit from information literacy training, how much more might non-native speakers of English benefit from such training? How can students who are studying in a foreign language determine the veracity and reliability of information in that foreign language, when they do not have the assurance and experience of the native speaker? ESL students clearly have as urgent a need to master information literacy as native speakers do.

Information literacy and ESL

Information, as noted previously, comes from a variety of sources. The computer and the Internet are huge boons to researchers and students everywhere. Most students today consider themselves skilled in using the computer, and in find-

ing information on the Internet. Students go to the Internet for nearly everything, including recipes and weather forecasts. So of course the Internet is the first choice to find an answer to an assignment given in class. Google has results for anything typed into the search box, right? So, a typical student assumes there will be few problems when a professor gives an English-language writing assignment.

Cooper and Bikowski (2007) reported on graduate-level writing tasks. "Across disciplines and levels (graduate and undergraduate), essays and short tasks were the most common assignments. Library research papers and reports on experiments/ observations were also common across the board while other tasks were only found sparingly. ... The study also found that in-class short tasks and short essays (one page or less) were significantly more common in the graduate science/technology courses" (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007, pp. 209-210). The students in my classes were undergraduates from non-scientific or non-technological disciplines across the university. Hence, over the semester-long course, I focused on three broad areas: personal (including essays, reflections, and reactions to magazine or newspaper articles); impersonal (interviews, journalistic-style reportage of events from a first-hand perspective, curriculum vita, business letters); and academic (a research paper). This last, the academic area, was the focus of my poster presentation at JALT 2010.

At Ohio University in the U.S., Bagnole and Miller (2003) describe a course taught specifically for ESL students, which is modeled on a course taught to native speakers at Ohio University. Bagnole and Miller's course is separate from the native speakers' course; they use an ESL classroom to teach research skills. The course is specifically structured with ESL students learning about both print and electronic sources: how to search databases effectively, and how to create and effectively use a bibliography, among other research skills.

Lesson plan

As presented at JALT, I focused on a course which I teach in Japan. Elements of Bagnole and Miller's course were folded into this author's Advanced English B (AEB), a writing course for high-level students in the Intensive English Program of the Language Center at Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU). The AEB course met twice a week in a computer lab. Many students were returnees who had spent several years overseas in an English-immersion environment. Over half of the class of first- and second-year students graduated from high schools in the US or Australia. These students had near-native command of spoken English, but writing in English did not come as easily to them.

As noted earlier, in the first month of the 15-week semester course, students wrote personal essays and reflective essays based on reading a newspaper or magazine article. Students wrote these assignments both in-class and out-of-class. The assignment was generally given on the second class meeting of the week, and was due by the first class meeting of the following week. This schedule gave the students usually four days (including a weekend) to get the first draft written and submitted by email to the instructor. I marked first drafts with content, cohesion and grammar notes, but not grades. Final drafts were due by the next class session that week. I graded final drafts by comparing to the student's first draft; as the number of assignments in the portfolio grew, in comparison to previous assignments. The second month's assignments were less personal: interviews, journalistic writing (both hard news and feature writing), curriculum vitae, business letters and a white paper (a research article for business purposes). The research paper was assigned during the final month of the course. If there was time in the last week, I asked students to give an oral presentation (with Powerpoint if they chose) of their research paper. This last assignment was based on an assumption that students used presentation skills in their other classes. Furthermore, most

researchers need to make oral presentations of their research work; this class seemed the ideal place to practice this academic process.

The course described in this paper and in the JALT 2010 poster presentation was taught in Japan for English as a Foreign Language learners, as English is not the common language of the community around the students. I have used this same course structure in the U.S., for international students in an Intensive English program, preparing to enter an American university as full-time, credit-earning undergraduate or graduate students. The U.S. situation was slightly more compressed, being in a 10-week schedule (the quarter system); the class met four times per week for an hour each time. The students I taught in the U.S. were most often from mainland China, with an occasional student from Korea, Indonesia, the Middle East or Africa.

Research Paper Module Part 1: Finding sources

Students were queried on where they might obtain information. Answers included:

- Personal knowledge
- Internet (including email, social networking sites, websites, and weblogs)
- Books and printed material
- Surveys
- Interviews
- Gossip

Students at KGU take a basic information literacy course during the first-year orientation, where they learn how to use the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) to locate books. I determined from previous classroom work that these students were indeed able to find books from the library, and could track down information of varying reliability on the internet. However, they did not seem to understand how to use the library journal databases. The KGU library includes databases from major subscription providers such as ProQuest and EBSCO. These databases provide articles in electronic format which were either originally printed in reliable journals, or appeared digitally in reliable and verifiable e-journals. In the AEB class, an additional class was devoted to a library orientation, where students learned [in Japanese] how to exploit library databases, particularly for journal articles. I chose to ask the Japanese teaching librarian at KGU to do this orientation, as she knew what students had been previously taught in the OPAC classes, and she would be another known and friendly face at the library when the student needed help in the future.

Research Module Part 2: Evaluating information

Most students were unfamiliar with research writing, and so providing students with examples of research writing was a necessary first step. As a class, we read a short research paper together to get a better idea of the final product. I pointed out issues such as objective tone (no "I" or "we") and complete citation of sources, both in-text and in a reference list or bibliography at the end of the paper. Non-verifiable sources from Google and Wikipedia were *not* permitted as cited sources. If a student could not identify an author, the source was generally not allowed for the research paper assignment.

Because students get much of their information from the internet, it is important to note that websites can have bias, and to show students how to evaluate websites. We looked at "hate" websites such as

- http://www.martinlutherking.org/
- http://www.creativitymovement.net/
- http://www.stormfront.org/forum/

- http://www.godhatesfags.com/
- http://www.aryannations.org/

as examples of extreme bias. Additional ideas can be found in the websites of many academic libraries; I found the Purdue University Library website particularly useful for its large number of examples [http://www.lib.purdue.edu]. An interesting homework assignment, which was not done in this class for lack of time, would be to ask students to locate biased websites in their native languages.

Research Module Part 3: Writing the research paper

After becoming familiar with library databases and reading through sample papers, students chose individual topics and wrote research papers. Each section of the paper (introduction, literature review, application, and conclusion) was submitted twice (first-draft and final-draft) for feedback and evaluation. Many researchers agree that writing a researched paper is cyclical. Accordingly, as these ESL students wrote their papers, they found new information every week, which was folded into their drafts and final products. During class time, while the group looked for information sources and composed drafts, I consulted with individual students about how each was feeling about progress in the research process.

What did students choose to write about? Remember that most students were returnees. Reflecting their individual experiences and interests, the research topics mostly covered social issues: teenage pregnancy, global warming, climate crisis, Asian refugees' plight in a non-accepting Japan, Japanese ageing society, child soldiers, and poverty in Brazil, among others. A couple of students took topics from the news: deflation in Japan and the Japan Air Lines fiscal crisis. One student loved her job at Starbucks, and wrote of the spectacular rise and market presence of that corporation. Another student was intensely interested in social entrepreneurship, and chose to explain this topic as a case study. He had had an internship experience in China with such an enterprise.

Conclusion

The results of folding information literacy into the AEB course were satisfactory. Students could survey a wide range of English-language writing assignments in a semester. Students wrote reasonably coherent papers, using sources that were mostly well documented. I think that the experience obtained in this EFL classroom will serve the students well as they go forward in their academic career.

As further research, it would be interesting to see the impact of this course with a lower-level class in which English skills are not as advanced as in the current study. I expect that the topics researched would perforce be far more limited, and it would not be possible to do all three modules in a semester.

A concern I had was that the assignments for this class were unrelated to any other classes that students were taking in this semester. Students were writing just for the Writing class without any broader goal. It would be interesting to conduct a Research Writing course in concordance with a thesis adviser. This ideal course would include students who are preparing to write their graduation theses (undergraduate or graduate level).

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Bio data

Susan Gilfert, MA, MSLIS, is currently teaching English, and is the Intensive English program coordinator, at Kwansei Gakuin University's Language Center in Nishinomiya, Japan; she has taught EF/SL for over 15 years. She has also been a library director in Lugano, Switzerland; a librarian in New York City; and a teacher trainer on a Fulbright grant at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, Malaysia. Email: sgilfert@kwansei.ac.jp

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Appendix: Resource-evaluation checklist

Some general criteria to consider as you evaluate information sources include:

- Authority: *who is giving the information? Is this person an expert?* Wikipedia doesn't give the source of the info, or expertise. Google Scholar does.
- Date of Publication: *How recent is the information?*
- Accuracy: *Can the information be confirmed elsewhere?*
- Scope / Depth / Breadth
- Objectivity: *Does the information provide more than one side of the argument?*
- Intended Audience: *Does the info seem to be pointed at only one group?*
- Level of Information: *lots of detail? Supporting facts?*
- Ease of Use

(Purdue Library Research Guides: Evaluation, 2009)

Handout to students

- ✓ What information is needed?
- ✓ Is there enough time to get sufficient information, or does the topic need to be revised?
- ✓ Does the information need to be current?
- ✓ Where does the information come from?
  - ✓ Is the source of information reliable?
  - ✓ Can the information be verified?
- ✓ How can the various pieces of information be used to prove my point, either positively or negatively?
- ✓ After assembling the information, what revision needs to be done?