TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: INDIVIDUAL TUTORING AS A SUPPLEMENT TO WORKSHOPS

STELLA BÜKER

Department of German Studies of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan

Abstract. In this chapter, the concept of the PunktUm-Project (Bielefeld University, Germany), which assists international students in academic writing, will be presented. Based on a compilation of relevant research findings on L2 writing, a scheme that categorises the students' individual problems analytically will be introduced. Then a practical example from a consultation sequence will demonstrate how extra-curricular writing assistance can react to the individual writing difficulties and for which of these it can be used as an effective tool. All in all, this contribution argues for a combined programme of individual tutoring and workshops.

Keywords: Culturally coined writing, German as a second language, German universities, International students, L2 writing, and Tutoring.

1 A WRITING PROJECT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Difficulties in academic writing do frequently occur; international as well as German students have to face them.[8] In the case of German students, this fact was hardly known and consequently caused some surprise, while for international stu-

[8] *The use of the binary terms 'German' and 'international' refers primarily to the nationality of the students. But it commonly also implies that a 'German' student received his primary and secondary education in Germany and has to be a native speaker of German, whereas an international student is believed to have a different cultural and linguistic background. However, in reality there are many more variations: A German student may be born in a foreign country and still hold a German passport, or a student with a foreign passport may have German as a native language. Even though the terms 'German' and 'international' are rather simplistic I will use them in this article for stylistic reasons: An explicit description of these terms would certainly be inconvenient for the reader.*

*Büker, S. (2003). Teaching Academic Writing to International Students: Individual Tutoring as a Supplement to Workshops. In: G. Rijlaarsdam (Series ed.) & L. Björk, G. Bräuer, L. Rienecker & P. Stray Jörgensen (Volume Eds.), Studies in Writing, Volume 12, Teaching Academic Writing in European Higher Education, pp. 41-57.**© 2003 Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.*

dents it was evident. Already in the 1970s, some studies[9] pointed to specific problems of international students during their studies: integration difficulties, isolation, trouble with authorities, and language deficits, which are also impinge on the writing process. However, only few initiatives were taken during the 70s and 80s which aimed at improving the students' writing skills. Overall the improvement of oral skills was given priority, *i.e.,* writing in the teaching of German as a Foreign Language (GFL) primarily served to test listening and reading comprehension and to a limited extent the competence in writing different text forms became an additional aim. This relation became more balanced in the late 80s and early 90s when a vivid interest in (academic) writing in a foreign language arose. There were several factors which favoured this development: In the USA the development of research in writing processes directed the attention to cognitive tasks that native speakers had to manage while writing. This had an impact on teaching methods in this field. At German universities the first writing labs were created, where not only local students asked for help, but international students as well. However, these institutions did not cater primarily for the foreign student's needs and in most cases teachers felt helpless. At the same time, L2[10]-writing processes were investigated, writing difficulties of international students were analysed in more detail, teaching methods were further reflected, and project initiatives were taken.[11] Particular emphasis was put on culturally coined[12] patterns of scholarly texts and the learners' foreign language difficulties, which impede the writing process. In addition, the current socio-political debate on the much-needed internationalisation of German universities gave new impetus to these initiatives.

As a consequence, we are now looking at a number of interesting research results and teaching conceptions in the area of writing training for international students. However, there is still much need of improvement in this field, for example in the research of writing processes, culturally-coined patterns in academic writing, the

---

[9] *See Grieswelle 1978, Skillen 1985, Projektgruppe Ausländerstudium 1987.*

[10] *L2 = Language 2; this abbreviation refers to the foreign language learnt, while the native language will be referred to as L1.*

[11] *In the year 2000 government funding for 'writing consultation and discipline-specific language training for foreign students' allowed the creation of project initiatives at ten North Rhine-Westfalian universities, which are aimed at supporting foreign student during their study of a discipline. Initiated by the PunktUm-Project of the University of Bielefeld, eight of these universities have formed a co-operation.*

[12] *The term 'culturally-coined' is my own translation of the term 'kulturelle Geprägtheit' which was introduced by Eßer (1997) to create an alternative to the common terms 'culturally-specific' and 'culturally-determined', which she regarded as problematic for the following reasons: Variations in text patterns easily tend to be described as culturally-specific, without explaining what it is in the culture that causes these text patterns. In contrast, the term 'culturally-coined' offers two advantages: Not all variations in text patterns must be exclusively explained by the culture concerned, which might also be a far too complex task. In addition, unlike 'culturally-specific' the term 'culturally-coined' does not trigger associations with a specific nationality.*

particular demands of German for academic purposes, and also in teaching conceptions and teaching material.

One of the initiatives, which arose throughout this development, is the 'Punkt-Um-Project: Language for Academic Purposes, Writing, and Communication. Individual tutoring and training for international students.' This project started as a pilot scheme in 1998 at the University of Bielefeld (Germany) and aims at providing support for international students during their study of a discipline and to enable them to complete their overseas studies more efficiently and successfully. The project's individual offers consist of consultation in language learning and academic writing, workshops on writing and oral skills, and language courses for discipline-specific and general academic purposes. As far as academic writing is concerned, we based the project on the concept of the successful approach of the university's Writing Lab,[13] which was modified and supplemented to meet the particular needs of international students.

From 1998 till 2002 I worked in this project and in this article I want to present the concept of its writing assistance: On the basis of a scheme that analytically demonstrates the difficulties involved while writing, I would like to delineate the essential features of our project and illustrate our way of teaching academic writing by a practical example. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate which insights had led us to combine individual tutoring, workshops, and language training for the area of writing assistance. In addition, it will become clear, what kind of general modifications had to be undertaken in order to adopt the approach of the university's Writing Lab.[14]

First, I would like to give an overview of research findings, which enables you to further comprehend our approach theoretically and to identify the specific practical aspects of our work.

2 THEORETICAL BASIS

Numerous studies and practical reports have, each with their own individual method, formulated answers to the following questions: Which are the problems that put a strain on international students' writing in Germany? Which are the individual difficulties that are faced by the reader / the writer respectively? How can teachers intervene? In this chapter, I want to present a survey of those studies which were relevant for our project.

Hayes and Flower (1980) have developed a model of writing processes for native speakers, which describes the activity of writing as a highly complex cognitive problem-solving process. The model explains how this activity may be subdivided into different sub processes the writer has to manage not in a linear order, but simultaneously and recursively. While writing, one tends to face a 'cognitive overload'. In addition to that, the act of writing has a knowledge-generating and knowl-

[13] *For further information see Frank/ Hollmann/ Ruhmann 1995, Ruhmann 1995 and the chapter by Frank et al. in this volume.*

[14] *This chapter can be seen as an extension of Büker 2001.*