

WHAT'S THE POINT? LEARNERS' PERCEPTION OF ACTIVITIES IN AN ACADEMIC WRITING CLASS

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Abstract

One feature of language classes is the range of activities that teachers organise. Activity theory suggests that there will also be considerable variety in the perceptions of students in the same class about the purpose of an activity. This project examines the perceptions of second language speakers in a first-year university academic writing class. Learners were asked to comment weekly on the purpose of one class activity. Their perceptions were then reported back to them collectively at the next session. In this study their answers are examined and compared with the teacher's perceptions. Although there was variety in what the students reported, all the purposes listed by the teacher were mentioned by one or more students. In a final session learners were asked whether or not they thought it was important to see a purpose in class activities. Here too opinions were divided, reflecting conflicting views about learner autonomy and teacher responsibility.

Activities in the language classroom

The present study is based on the views of students and their teacher about activities organised in an academic writing class. It questions whether students see any importance in an activity's outcome or process and if so, how similar their perceptions are to one another's and to the teacher's? It would not be surprising if perceptions differed. According to sociocultural theory, students "play a major role in shaping the goal and ultimate outcomes of tasks set for them by their teachers" (Lantolf, 2000, pp12-13). Activity theory, one aspect of sociocultural theory, explains that in a particular classroom at a given time "different activities might be underway ... despite the fact that all of the participants display the same or similar overt behaviours in a task" (p.12).

A further question is whether it matters if students see different purposes from those of their teachers or even fail to think about the purpose at all. Williams and Burden (1997, p. 70) believe that it does. According to them "any learning task must have value or personal meaning to the learners"; they extend the definition of 'meaning' beyond the here and now to more general learning which will continue after the learning activity is over. In discussions of purpose a distinction is made between thinking about the process and the outcome of an activity (Scharle and Szabo, 2000, p.7). "When we encourage students to focus on the *process* of their learning (rather than the *outcome*) we help them consciously examine their own contributions to their learning."

Studies have investigated students' perceptions of processes and outcomes. Barkhuizen (1998) asked high school learners to say three things about their class activities, one about the process (how much they enjoyed types of activity) and two about outcomes (how useful they thought each was for learning English and how useful it would be to them on leaving school). Their teachers "could hardly believe" (p. 102) how different some of the students' perceptions were from their own. Three perspectives on tasks published for adult language learners in general English classes were canvassed by Lewis and Basturkmen (2000). Data was collected through analysing task designers' stated aims, class teachers' aims expressed in their own words and students' responses to checklists. A comparison found considerable differences within and between the three sources. While some researchers conclude that these mismatches are a problem, for Kumaravadivelu (1991, p.106) "mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation may be inevitable, but they need not be totally negative". Rather, he believes they provide the chance for further negotiation.

Three rationales underpin a study of learner perceptions of class activities. One is the opportunity it provides for helping learners "to perceive how the activity is of value to them" (Williams and Burden, 1997 p. 70) since there is a strong link between valuing an activity and being motivated "to engage in .. and [succeed] in it." (p. 125). Even when the teacher and the learners see different purposes, Kumaravadivelu (1991, p.106) believes it is possible for learners and teachers to negotiate their different intentions and interpretations. Another rationale for such a study relates to learner autonomy. Sinclair's (2000, p.9) recent descriptors of learner autonomy include the following. "Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process..." One further and specific rationale for studying learners' perspectives in an academic writing course is the absence of learners' voices in academic writing research (Leki, 2001).

A small-scale action research project was developed around the following questions.

1. What purposes do students see in class activities in an academic writing class?
2. Is there an increase in the number of purposes perceived by the students over a five week period?
3. How do students' perceptions of the purposes compare with their teacher's?
4. At the end of the five weeks did students believe it was important to know the purpose of an activity?

The study

The research was carried out by the regular class teacher in an academic writing class of English second language speakers in their first, second and third years of university study. The course was taught in two blocks of two hours weekly for twelve weeks with the goal of learning to write expository and argumentative essays. The study extended from weeks 2 to 7 of the university semester, and between 11 and 17 students attended each session. There were two sources of data. The teacher made notes on the intended purpose of the activity before reading the students' responses and the students' stated their view of the purpose via a number of prompts.

The research and teaching processes were interwoven as summarised in Figure 1 and elaborated below.

CLASS ACTIVITY	COURSE FOCUS	PROMPT TO ELICIT PURPOSES
Peer teaching on....	...options for paragraph development	Question: <i>What .. is the purpose of..... ?</i>
Journal writing on...	... the process of learning to write	Sentence completion: <i>I think some of the purposes of are...</i>
Peer feedback on..	... a 'compare and contrast' paragraph	Compare and contrast teacher and peer feedback.
Group interviews on...	.. students' previous learning experiences [From data to topic sentence]	Develop a paragraph from a given topic sentence.
Student questions and teacher answers on...	... features of expository essays [Review]	List advantages and disadvantages

Figure 1: The teaching-data collection cycle

The class activities selected for examination were those most likely to be unfamiliar to the students. These are listed in the first column. Each activity was linked with one part of their writing course, as listed in Column Two, 'Course focus'. Column Three lists the prompt used each time to elicit the students' views. The students' responses were recycled to the class in various ways to illustrate part of the essay writing process. For example, a list of their answers to the question and sentence completion prompts was provided as an example of the brainstorming stage. On another occasion the teacher used their 'compare and contrast' paragraphs to write a complete essay which was then analysed in class for its content and its format.

Details of the tasks now follow in the order in which they were completed and commented on.

Peer teaching

Students were asked to work in groups to teach the rest of the class one way of developing an essay paragraph. All the content was in the course book and the task instructions were as follows.

Peer teaching:

1. *Work in five small groups. Each group reads and discusses one section of Pages ... of the course book.*
[5 ways to expand a topic sentence into a paragraph]
2. *Discuss these questions:*
 - a. *What exactly is this method of expanding the topic sentence?*
 - b. *What sort of topics could be expanded in this way?*
 - c. *What sort of words and phrases join ideas that are linked in this way?*
3. *Plan an interesting way to teach the content to the rest of the class.*
4. *Each group then teaches their section to the whole class.*

Journal writing

Journal writing was completed once a week, handed to the teacher and returned the next day with a response. By the time they wrote their views on this process they had completed three journal entries.

Peer feedback

In this activity students provided feedback to one another on paragraphs which had been expanded from a topic sentence.

Group interviews

Working in groups, the students interviewed one another on their previous experiences of learning to write in their own and their second languages.

Student questions and teacher answers

For part of one lesson the teacher announced that the content would be taught / revised only in response to their questions. Each student wrote one question and these were answered in detail one by one.

Following the fifth week of the course there was a two-week mid-semester break, during which a preliminary analysis was done of the students' responses. It was then decided to have a final session with a different focus on the first day back. Students were asked to consider the question "Does it matter if students do not see the purpose to a class activity?". This session started with an overhead summarising students' reported purposes for class activities from the previous five weeks. To start their thinking there was a general discussion about which of the activities might illustrate each purpose. Next students worked in groups to brainstorm the case for and against the question "Does it matter...?". Finally each student wrote an essay to support their Yes or No stance. This essay coincided with the beginning of a unit of work on the argument essay.

The results

The first research question investigated the purposes students saw for each activity. Table 1 summarises these, using categories worded by the teacher to summarise the students' responses. The abbreviations are as follows: PT (peer teaching), JW (journal writing), PF (peer feedback), GI (group interviews) and QT (question time). A category is marked even if only one student mentioned it and sample comments follow the table.

PURPOSE	PT	JW	PF	GI	QT
to understand course content	●	●	●	●	●
to learn ways of learning	●	●	●	●	●
to meet the needs of individuals	●	●	●		●
for affective purposes	●	●		●	●
for social/ cooperative purposes	●		●	●	
to practise an additional skill	●			●	●
to make learners more autonomous	●		●		●
to provide feedback for the teacher	●	●			●
to increase student participation	●				●
for other purposes		●			
No. OF STUDENTS RESPONDING	17	16	11	12	11

Table 1: Students' views of the purpose of each activity

to understand course content:

This category included purposes expressed in terms of achieving course goals and understanding course content. Every activity had this as a stated purpose.

"Teaching others leads to teaching oneself. If you don't understand you can't explain it to others" (peer teaching)

"It's much easier to understand by oral than by writing." (peer feedback)

to learn ways of learning:

Answers in this category went beyond the stated goals of the course and tended to be expressed in general terms. Again, every activity was said (by one or more students) to serve this purpose.

"Students can share their experiences, their stories of success and failure." (group interviews)

"One can always learn from others' experiences" (group interviews)

"Encourage students to think." (question time)

to meet the needs of individuals:

This category included one learner's reference to learning better by listening than by reading and a more general point about individual feedback. All activities except the group interviews were said to fulfil this purpose.

" peer feedback .. sometimes notices something you don't realise." (peer feedback)

for affective purposes

Affective purposes included confidence, interest and the chance to express feelings. Only the peer feedback activity was not mentioned here.

"to communicate and express our sorrow feelings." (journals)

"It is a good way to build confidence of writing...." (journals)

"Students will be interested to get their answers in class." (question time)

for social/cooperative purposes:

Social purposes referred to students' relations with one another. Predictably, journal writing and having the teacher answer questions did not figure here.

".. feedback from students can help to establish social relations with each other." (peer feedback)

"It improves social skills." (group interviews)

to practise an additional skill:

The answers here referred to speaking and reading skills. Only three activities were said to have this purpose.

"to be engaged in reading." (peer teaching)

"It improves students' speaking" (question time)

"Students who are usually too shy for asking questions are forced to do so (even if this might be negative in the first place) and therefore might get used to questions in general." (question time)

to make learners more autonomous:

Students believed that three activities increased learner autonomy: peer teaching, peer feedback and question time.

"Students know which part they don't understand." (peer teaching)

".. in the reciprocal process both students are responsible for the truth value of the statements." (peer feedback)

to provide feedback for the teacher:

The purpose of three tasks was given as feedback for the teacher.

"Teacher can know how much do I understand from lesson." (journals)

to increase student participation:

Increased student participation was mentioned as a purpose of peer teaching and question time.

"Everyone participates." (peer teaching)

"All students have to talk, even shy ones." (question time)

for other purposes:

Two 'other' purposes were mentioned by students for journal writing. One was as a means of student-teacher communication and the second was "... *to correct the wrong spellings or errors of grammar*". In fact the teacher never corrected their journal language, but concentrated on responding to the content. A follow-up interview would have clarified this point, but since responses were anonymous this couldn't happen.

The second research question investigated whether the number of perceived purposes increased during the five weeks. As Table 2 showed, the greatest number of purposes was listed for the first task, the group peer teaching activity and the second highest number for the final activity, question time. There was thus no increase in the number of purposes mentioned.

The third research question investigated the similarity and differences between the students' and teacher's beliefs about the purpose of each activity. Table 2 repeats Table 1 but adds the teacher's reported purposes [T].

PURPOSE	PT	JW	PF	GI	QT
to understand course content	●T	●	●	●T	●
to learn ways of learning	●	●T	●	●T	●
to meet the needs of individual	●	●T	●		●T
for affective purposes	●T	●	T	●T	●T
for social/ cooperative purposes	●T		●T	●T	
to practise an additional skill	●			●	●
to make learners more autonomous	●		●		●T
to provide feedback for the teacher	●	●T			●
to increase student participation	●	●			●
for other purposes		●T			

Table 2: Students' and teachers' views of the purpose of each activity

In all but one case students mentioned each of the purposes which the teacher had noted. the exception was that nobody suggested that peer feedback had an affective purpose. On the other hand, many of the students' suggested purposes were not listed by the teacher.

Finally, to determine the answer to Research Question 4, the class discussed and then wrote argument essays on whether knowing the purposes of a class activity is important. Although only nine students actually handed in a completed essay the topic was discussed first by all 11 students and therefore their arguments and counterarguments could be expected to reflect collective views. Eight points were made, with the numbers slightly in favour of knowing the purpose. Five students favoured knowing the purpose and three disagreed that this was important.

A slightly stronger case for knowing emerges if we consider how many actual students supported each side. Six students believed that knowing the purpose was important and only three believed it was not. The reasons for knowing were:

1. It makes us remember and understand what has been learned
2. Students are more willing to do the activities if they see the point.
3. The class is more interesting.

4. Students will start thinking for themselves whether the teacher is fulfilling the course goals (*"the students will get more power based on the critique of the teacher."*).
5. Knowing is part of learning. (*"it helps to turn the wheel of learning"*)

Reasons listed for not knowing were:

1. It's the teacher's job to know the reason. (*".. when the teacher chooses some activities to be done in class she must know clearly how the students can benefit from those."*)
2. If students think about the reason they can't enjoy the process.
3. It's a waste of time; students need to concentrate on what they are doing.

The fact that students had considered both sides is reflected in one of their answers:

"They can see more clearly if the teacher fulfils his original goal and this might be one quality needed in the teaching profession. This could be countered by the argument that the evaluation takes the teacher under too much pressure. The positive effect of this pressure might be that through the reflection of the class the teacher needs to be critical [of] his own teaching style and therefore might elaborate his abilities... whereas in traditional hierarchical structured teaching the teacher has an absolute power position over the student, this could change based on the possibility of critique."

Discussion

Scharle and Szabo (2000) suggested encouraging students to focus on the learning process rather than the outcome. The prompts for this study did not make this distinction but the students' list of purposes seem to mix the two. In fact it could be difficult to try and categorise their suggested purposes in this way. For instance, does the social purpose of the process influence after-class relationships? If so social purposes could be seen as an outcome.

One pattern in the results is encouraging. Students saw that each activity had some purpose in relation to the course content and learning to learn. Also they saw that four of the five activities met individual needs. Some of the gaps in purposes are predictable. For example, journal writing was clearly not a cooperative activity; nor did it practise any skill except writing. Interestingly, although journal writing was completed by every student present, nobody suggested that it increased participation. Perhaps this point was too obvious for them to mention.

One way of considering the results is to see which activities elicited the most purposes. The longest list went to peer teaching. Did this activity have most suggestions simply because it came first when the idea of suggesting reasons was fresh to the students? Alternatively was this really an activity which was seen as very purposeful? If so, it is worth repeating with different content.

Another way of viewing the results is to see which purposes were attributed to most activities. Students believed that all the activities served purposes related to the course content and to learning

to learn. If affective and social/cooperative purposes are taken together, then all activities were also seen as serving these purposes. Since all activities did increase student participation, the fact that this point is mentioned twice only is not serious. At first reading it could be a concern that only two activities were seen as leading to learner autonomy. However, this could be simply a matter of wording. Perhaps 'to learn ways of learning' (which applied to every activity) could be seen as part of autonomy.

The second question, about whether the number of perceived purposes increased over time gave a negative result. The number varied down and up through the five weeks but there was no overall increase. There are two possible explanations for this, one being the shortness of the study. To explore a pattern of an increased number of purposes would probably have taken more than the six weeks allotted to the study. A second possible explanation is the type of prompt. The two longest lists were elicited by a question (9 points) and the request for a list (8 points). With hindsight an identical prompt each time might have led to more comparable data although it would have conflicted with the teacher-researcher's aim of linking the research with the wider class goals of learning to plan and write essays.

The third question compared students' perceptions with the teacher's. One rationale for the study was Kumaravadivelu's (1991) recommendation that teachers use any mismatches between their own and the students' perceptions as the basis for discussion. However there were no points listed by the teacher but not mentioned by any students, which contradicts the earlier studies (Barkhuizen, 1998; Lewis and Basturkmen, 2000). There are two possible explanations for this, one being that our study noted a point regardless of how many students mentioned it. It is also possible that having the study carried out by the regular class teacher led to a closer match.

Conversely, while students valued all the purposes suggested by the teacher, the reverse appears not to be true. On reflection, if the students' list had been available at the start the teacher-researcher would probably have ticked almost all of the points they made. The one exception would be 'to practise an additional skill' which seems to be a means to an end rather than a significant purpose in terms of the course aims.

The fourth research question underpinned the rest of the study by investigating whether students felt there was any need for them to think about the purpose of class activities. As noted above, since the essays were preceded by whole class and small group discussions, the results are taken to reflect the

views of the whole class. Perhaps more interesting than the number of reasons and of students on each side are the actual answers they gave. The statements in favour of knowing make substantial points relating to cognition and motivation. This seems to support the case made by Williams and Burden (1997) for helping students to see the value of what they are doing as part of motivation. The students' case against knowing the purpose is equally interesting and directly contradicts the positive views. One student believes that knowing the purpose is the role of the teacher, another says thinking about reasons hinders enjoyment and a third sees it as a waste of time, taking away from concentration.

We need to add a caveat here, which applies to all the answers. Leki (2001:18) addresses doubts expressed by some researchers about the honesty of students' answers collected for research. Could it be that in our study the students were looking for something to say because they were asked to, rather than because of a deep conviction? If that were the case, it would still not invalidate the pedagogic purpose of raising consciousness. Leki's point is more philosophically based. She counters that questioning the truth of students' statements is out of place in "a postmodern intellectual climate" where definitions of absolute truth are challenged.

There is an additional possible bias in the final research question of our study. While the first five weeks paralleled students' learning about expository essays, by the sixth week they were practising writing argument essays. This was the point at which they were asked whether it was important to know the purpose of activities. It is quite possible that in order to build up counterarguments as they were being taught, they may have included points they were not themselves convinced of. On the other hand, in the pre-writing group discussion, students appeared to be taking sides quite vehemently for or against the thesis.

Conclusion

In summary, what do these results tell us? Does the fact that students don't state a particular purpose mean that purpose does not exist for them? What about students who don't want to know the purpose? It seems from the answers to the final research question that some would be satisfied with a teacher who said, "Trust me. I know what's good for you." If we take to heart the link between understanding purposes, motivation and learning (Williams and Burden, 1997), as well as Sinclair's (2000, p.9) point that learner autonomy depends on "conscious awareness of the learning process", then studies of this kind are important. Students were made aware of a range of possible purposes,

whether or not they agreed with them. Furthermore the study implied that the teacher wanted them to think about purposes. The fact that by the end not all were convinced reflects the fact that not all students in a class learn what the teacher sets out to teach them. In addition, when students have come from traditional schooling systems becoming autonomous is sometime seen as in conflict with the expected role of the teacher.

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