

Thesis Statement as a Struggle for ESL Students

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Working as a writing tutor gives me the opportunity to closely observe common issues that of both native and non-native English speaking students at undergraduate level. A very basic element of academic writing that a considerable number of both types of students struggle with is constructing an acceptable thesis statement. Even though this element seems to be an obstacle for students who are native and non-native English speakers, this paper focuses on a combination of teaching ideas that would work well together to help students of English as a second language (ESL) students better produce thesis statements.

Literature

Analyzing students' errors regarding thesis statements is essential to understand their needs and better help them write for academic purposes. Defining some reasons behind L2 students mistakes regarding thesis statements is a possible way of analyzing their errors. First, language interference or negative transfer is one of the reasons ESL students make mistakes when writing a thesis statement. The writing style of several first languages of ESL students, such as Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, and Japanese, is not linear in nature such as the western writing style of English. This negatively affects ESL students' writing in their L2 (Reid, 1984). Therefore, thesis statements are a very crucial element of writing academically that some ESL students in advanced levels do not fully master due to their L1 interference. Other possible ways of L1 interference are the lack of a thesis statement in students' L1s or the different placement of it in an academic essay in their L1 in comparison to their L2. Another reason for ESL students mistakes when constructing thesis statements is that language learners are still not fully aware of when, how, and why they construct a thesis statement in English academic writing. To address ESL students' issues of thesis statements, they could work collaboratively as well as metacognitively on their thesis statements. The combination of the previous two tips is a key in helping ESL students develop their level of constructing thesis statements.

The significance of working collaboratively in the field of second language acquisition has been supported by research. According to Dobao (2012), engaging students in collaboratively assessing new input or correcting their or others' mistakes is a source of L2 learning because through working collaboratively, students talk about or question their linguistic problems. Their collaborative dialogues that help them to solve linguistic problems is known as language-related episodes (LREs). Therefore, encouraging students to talk about input that can be new or their input is great source of learning as they negotiate that input to make it linguistically better.

Another other teaching idea that aims to help ESL learners produce better thesis statements is asking them some questions to metacognitively reflect on their knowledge regarding constructing a thesis statement. Metacognition refers to learners' monitoring, reflecting upon and regulating their learning (As cited in Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011).

Methodology

Working in a collaborative way on constructing thesis statements can be approached in different ways. In this paper, I am proposing an activity that I have given to my students in an undergraduate first year composition class that was about guiding them to write an analysis essay of a person's profile on a social networking site (SNS). This activity worked well for my students to the extent that motivates me to share it with others. The goals of this activity are collaboratively assessing three thesis statements, providing suggestions to improve unacceptable thesis statements, and choosing one thesis statement as the best model that students can follow. As in appendix A, the activity includes three thesis statements of analytical essays of a person's SNS that students can assess. It asks students to provide suggestions to improve the less acceptable thesis statements and choose one thesis statement as a model to follow in peers. This activity can be a warm-up activity that takes 10 minutes before students start writing their essays. Assessing some thesis statements in peers is a way to raise students' awareness to some criteria of acceptable and unacceptable thesis statements in academic writing by noticing and analyzing the strength and weakness of these sentences. If students realize some characteristics of acceptable and unacceptable thesis statements, they more likely to produce acceptable thesis statements themselves. Many of my students wrote acceptable thesis statements after this activity.

To help ESL students reflect metacognitively on their thesis statements' construction, teachers can provide them with some metacognitive questions to encourage them deeply thinking about their thesis statements with the intention of improving their level of creating thesis statements in academic writing. Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) argue that the students' metacognition fosters their awareness of a given writing genre. In a freshman composition class, students are usually asked to submit three drafts of an academic essay. After grading students' first drafts, teachers can provide them with reflective questions about their thesis statements (See appendix B). Teachers can give their students these questions consistently after getting their grades on each first draft all over the semester. Giving students the reflective questions after their first drafts is essential to help them work on polishing their thesis statements if needed in their second and possibly final drafts. These questions help teachers to both understand their students' needs and difficulties in terms of writing thesis statements and encourage students to take the time to think about their strength and weakness of writing acceptable thesis statements. As mentioned previously in this paper, combining working metacognitively and collaboratively is essential to best assist students to improve their levels of writing acceptable thesis statements.

Summary

Some might argue that teaching freshman students how to construct acceptable thesis statement is not as important as teaching lower level of ESL student how to come up with academically acceptable thesis statements. However, a thesis statement is a basic component of some academic writing genres that freshman students need to master due to the fact that they write various academic essays that are not academically acceptable without thesis statements. In addition, even first year students whose first language is English may struggle with constructing acceptable thesis statements. Even though the proposed two teaching ideas seem to work best together, the theories and research behind each of them show that it is also effective to apply each strategy separately.

References

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- Negretti, R., & Kuteeva, M. (2011). Fostering metacognitive genre awareness in L2 academic reading and writing: A case study of pre-service English teachers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 20(2), 95-110.
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Appendix A

Activity (Work in Pairs)

- Based on what we have discussed so far about writing academically, identify whether the following thesis statements are good or need improvement? Explain why?
- Provide some suggestions to improve the unacceptable thesis statements.
- If you had to choose one of these sentences as a model to follow in your essay, which one would you choose? Why?
 - a) Great, amazing and highly recommended are characteristics that highlight Nora's YouTube channel.
 - b) Based on Leslie's Twitter account, her purpose of communication is educational, her audience is advanced English learners and her way of presenting her ideas is academic.
 - c) John's Instagram account is inspirational because he posts quotations about how to be successful, focuses on motivating upset individuals and provides his thoughts in a persuasive way.

Appendix B

Answer the following questions about your thesis statement:

A. Questions about your current essay's thesis statement

1. Are you satisfied with your thesis statement? Why?
2. What are the strength/weakness of your thesis statement?
3. If your thesis statement needs improvement, what would you do to make it better?

B. Questions about your thesis statement's construction in general

1. Do you struggle having a good thesis statement? Why?
2. How do you assess your level of constructing a good thesis statement? (A,B,C,D,F)