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Solving the English-as-a-Second Language Writers' Dilemma

By Thomas Nowalk

"I meant what I said, and I said what I meant." - Horton the Elephant

This brief work stands against a four-year stretch of writing classes at Northern Virginia Community College, with the author teaching English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students how to write academic essays. The courses taught have included high intermediate and advanced writers, many of whom plan to earn a degree at the college or any number of four-year schools around Virginia. For these non-native writers, the clarity expressed above by Dr. Seuss's Horton is often a foreign experience: these students find it quite difficult to write accurately what they mean.

This exploratory paper first looks at the dilemma from the students' perspective. From their view, overcoming Horton's problem requires a heavy dose of grammar fused with vocabulary. Writing instructors address the dilemma through their teaching practice, which is often, according to Joy Reid et al. (2008), founded on misunderstandings of academic writers' needs. Reid and her co-authors counter those practices with a research-driven series of perspectives on learning writing. Examining the insights drawn from these views, this paper turns to a solution from the past: the Trivium, which was the classical model for teaching writing from the Classical Age through the Renaissance. The Trivium is but one possible

solution for helping ESL writers address the Horton dilemma.

"The Medieval Trivium, with its attention to rhetorical exercises, offers a way to help ESL writers achieve a state where they can express accurately what they mean, or bring intention, language, and written genre together in a more concise presentation."

A Writing Teacher's Exploration

Many of today's ESL writers, particularly advanced writers, might envy Horton the Elephant. Horton is the loyal character in the Dr.

Seuss classic *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940), who faithfully cares for a nested egg while the mother bird flies away on an extended vacation. In classroom surveys and journals collected in this author's classes, and the recorded observations in those classes, many ESL students have pointed to the difficulty with the first phrase of Horton's quote: "I meant what I said." Still many more students have commented on the difficulty with the second clause: "I said what I meant." The confidence that Horton expresses through his word choices contrasts with the feelings of many ESL writers, particularly the majority that want to put ESL classes behind them so that they can enter academic programs.

This author has reviewed ten classroom surveys administered since 2004 that are used for formative evaluation of classes. As stated in the introduction, a consistent priority given among different classes has remained grammar: practicing grammar, comprehending grammar rules, and conducting frequent feedback through quizzes. This attention to grammar is what students would emphasize over organization and other essay-relevant topics. Another activity preference across the semesters has been participating in group work, as students have consistently reported a preference for working with grammar within groups. Overall, the ten survey results representing nine semesters of writing classes show the following themes:

- Students see grammar and correctness as most important for writing.
- Students see vocabulary as closely related to grammar and correctness.
- Students value group work as a useful way to acquire the first two.
- Students value journal writing as another useful way to practice writing.

With the attention to grammar, two words often emerge: practice and correctness. Students frequently ask for opportunities to work with grammar, perhaps for greater mileage with grammatical forms, while at the same time requesting time to get those forms right.

Besides the survey instruments reported, the author recorded observations of his classes. He noted a number of classroom incidents such as student comments in class, student comments in their journals, teacher reflections in the notebook, and instructional interventions. The notebooks also included student disciplinary issues, critical incidents in class, and routine class administrative notes, such as syllabus references or reservations for the campus computer lab.

One theme that stands out among the observation notes is that of consistency. Student writers prefer two kinds of consistency: with the past

and with their personal goals. Consistency with the past refers to legacy topics that students have grown accustomed to in previous classes. Here is the comfort of the familiar. Here is where, on the first day of class, advanced writers may recite the parts of an essay learned in previous courses: the hook, thesis, body, and conclusion. Sometimes, though, there may be a conflict with inconsistency, as when a student noted in a journal that the author was using different grammar terminology from a past writing teacher. Students also look for relevance with their personal goals, usually referred to as career consistency. A student wrote, for example, in a journal: "This class affects me a lot for my job because I can write the sale's report." Another student notes that "most higher level positions require a lot of email or some kind of communication." Consistency connects students to some constants in their lives.

A second theme is that of the writing process. Here the writing process refers to the students' own approaches to completing writing tasks, which often differ from the more prescriptive process common in many ESL writing texts. During an in-class writing exercise, for example, some students warmed up with a freewriting activity while others started writing the short essay. Most students would agree with this student's observation, that "everything [in the writing process] is [sic] result of effort and decision." Some students report translation as part of the process, as in one writer's note: "The first step that usually occurs is to make these ideas [for an essay] in their native structure and later translate them into English." Only a few students reported reading sample essays as part of their writing process.

A key concern with the writing process, as reported with the surveys, is grammar, which many students see as "many rules that need [sic] to learn." Some students have even remarked that they wonder whether native-speaker writers have a good grasp of those rules, as when an advanced writer questioned, "Why do we need so many [sic] grammar since most Americans even can't use them?" A number of grammar observations recount the terms and parts of speech common to many writing texts, as in student observations on articles or punctuation marks. The focus on grammar as part of the writing process refers to one student's reflection on how "to make my essay perfect." Students look for combinations of wording that accurately express their thinking.

A final theme is that of instructional intervention. This means the author as teacher, reflecting on his own decisions and resulting actions. These include the many short notes inserted in margins or below lesson plans, referring to administration of the class, particularly with keeping the

instruction aligned with the syllabus policies and scheduling. Along with instructional intervention is the resulting impact on the class. At times, especially after an active learning exercise done in groups, the impact is a positive class atmosphere. The resulting feedback, though, may also end in confusion or dismay. The teacher notebooks chronicle the choices and decisions made to move multiple impacts toward the syllabus goals.

Over this teacher's four-year exploration, the ESL writers have highlighted their need for sentence-level composition. Through the surveys and observations conducted with the classes, the students have shared this perspective:

- Grammar and correctness rank highest in priority.
- Grammar and correctness are seen as rules.
- Rules for grammar and vocabulary usage are critical.
- Students bring expectations for grammar and grammar practice from past classes.
- Multiple writing processes help students to meet writing tasks.
- Students favor group activities.
- Journal writing is a useful activity.

The above points outline the students' answer to the Horton dilemma. For students to mean what they say, or say what they mean, they must be able to craft effective sentences through rules of word and grammar usage and apply a set of possible writing-decision-making processes.

Lessons from the Literature

In recent years, ESL teaching has professed a variety of approaches to help the Horton dilemma, ranging from process writing to contrastive rhetoric and including more collaborative methods that feature peer review and writing conferences (Reid, 1993). Nunan (1999) discusses the two conceptual poles common in ESL writing, the writing-as-process versus writing-as-product approaches. Nunan recommends a third alternative to the opposing views: a discourse-oriented approach. A more discourse-oriented view appears in Reid et al.'s (2008) work, as one of a list of recommendations countering the prevalent myths in ESL-writing instruction.

The first set of myths refers to the role of vocabulary in teaching writing. Folse (2008) argues that writing teachers should teach vocabulary in their classes, including explicit instruction with single words and collocations. In a later chapter, Conrad (2008) shows that the tools used in corpus-based research offer potential routes for determining vocabulary. Corpus-based research or derived word lists offer means for determining

language contents, evaluating course texts, or possibly creating more authentic texts for use in class. Indeed, corpus linguistics provides analytic tools for teachers to raise awareness of not only academic language but also its contrasts with everyday speech.

The vocabulary myths point to an earlier article by Horowitz (1986), which surveyed academic departments at a university in the Midwest. Horowitz set out to determine what kinds of writing tasks students in those departments were required to complete. Horowitz discovered that most of the academic writing assignments in those classes were controlled in terms of very specific conditions and instructions. Students were also directed to take a position or make a thesis with the given data. In many cases, students were asked to synthesize different sources of information. Certainly, whether the subject was biology or economics, students there had to forge discipline-specific vocabulary into a complete draft.

Horowitz (1986) would no doubt agree with Shuermann (2008) in emphasizing the role of citations. Shuermann notes “resistance to teaching citation” (p. 19) as common among many ESL faculty. Shuermann believes that citations – “working with the words and ideas of others” (p. 18) – belong early in ESL programs and may work as a useful deterrence to plagiarism. In agreement with Folse (2008) above, Shuermann recommends teaching the vocabulary for introducing and responding to paraphrases, quotations, and other citations. Hyland (2008) further reminds teachers of the use of hedging, the notion that academic writing rarely expresses certainty and that academic writers often prefer to hedge information with such markers as “likely,” “may,” or “suggest.” All three authors point to academic writing as managing other texts, usually in degrees of possibility.

In the years that have passed since Horowitz’s (1986) work on academic writing tasks, much has been written about the discourse features of department-specific language, leading Byrd and Bunting (2008) to warn of what may often be instructors’ intuitive assertions of effective writing. The authors warn in their title that “one size does not fit all.” Corpus-based dictionaries and grammar guides now provide information on academic texts, allowing ESL teachers to make smarter choices on course materials or choices on materials that more closely match academic language.

Byrd and Bunting (2008) remind teachers of the often stark differences between everyday speech and academic language and even in language used between different academic disciplines. In this view, grammar represents a range of possible choices. It is also within this understanding that Ferris (2008) finds it unrealistic that ESL teachers try to correct all student errors.

A final myth presented in Reid's *Writing Myths* concerns the focus of academic writing, which traditionally has focused on the paragraph and essay. Cavusgil (2008) states,

We must also teach students the skills and strategies needed to complete a variety of academic tasks such as taking class notes, responding to short answer or essay examination items, writing summaries and critiques, and – it seems – composing electronic messages. (p. 141)

As the other authors have suggested, there is more to academic writing than paragraphs and essays. All that has been discussed so far, in terms of academic vocabulary and discourse features, hedging, and the assignments given by professors suggest a greater variety of text expectations. Perhaps a more controversial version of this myth is adherence to the popular five-paragraph essay: that the focus should be on preparing students to write five-paragraph essays. This topic, though, is not mentioned in Cavusgil (2008) or Reid (2008) for a simple reason. If used, the five-paragraph essay is a rare assignment among academic disciplines.

What Reid and the other writers have to tell us about the Horton dilemma is simple enough: variety. For ESL writers to learn to say what they mean, they must learn to work with a variety of discourse features for a variety of academic purposes. As the students felt in the previous section, grammar and vocabulary mesh for these different purposes, producing composition that frequently includes a source or two of other information. Students need to accomplish this type of synthesis when writing emails, paragraphs, answers to essay questions, summaries of other authors, and other academic tasks. This need raises the question of what methodology or methodologies might be effective. For this 21st century classroom need, this author presents a classical solution.

Something Old for Something New

The author's choice of a methodology depends on the combined insights from his own practitioner research with Reid (2008) and her co-authors' work on myths in ESL writing. Table 1 shows common, intersecting points between the two bodies of work. The goal here is to establish criteria for choice of a method, though a caveat is necessary: the work here is limited to the practitioner research of a single teacher, with the aid of the literature reported.

Table 1. Intersecting Points of Methodology

<i>Results from Author's Practitioner Research</i>	<i>Conclusions from the Literature Reviewed on Instruction Myths</i>
Priority of grammar	Discourse-driven grammar
Need for frequent correction	Not all errors can be corrected
Grammar as rules	Importance of vocabulary and word usage (e.g., use of collocations)
Legacy expectations	Not expressing certainty, but hedging meaning and expression
Multifaceted writing process (not prescriptive)	Corpus-driven content and materials
Preference for active group instruction	Variety of academic writing tasks
Preference for journal writing	Write about the words and ideas of others (i.e. citations)

Table 1 may be read as focusing on grammar as word combinations and sentence-level features, with the wording – including patterns for hedging – driven by corpus-based materials. Word lists such as the Academic Word List represent one example of corpus-research material. Further, the table suggests applying student preferences for instruction, whether group or journal, to working with academic writing tasks, including working with the materials of other writers. It may even be possible to provide group activities in which students, working in small groups, cite each other. With these different possibilities, the literature recommends not correcting every error discovered, but focusing on errors most relevant for instruction in a given lesson.

What the above work also suggests is the need for working with authentic or close-to-authentic materials that resemble actual academic

work. As recommended, these may include emails to professors, short answers to questions, comparing or synthesizing written works, or writing an academic essay on a topic. The authors in Reid's (2008) volume advise showing students the differences between academic language and everyday speech, so good samples are necessary. More importantly, a more effective teaching methodology should give strong exposure to language features that many ESL students no doubt see for the first time.

The question now is what methodology may address the needs described in the table above. What approach may give the students the exposure to the grammar that they value while at the same time giving practice with a variety of academic texts? Or what approach may assist with giving an engaging interaction with the patterns of language, the rules students want to understand, while at the same time introducing them to discourse features recommended by the literature? The answer proposed here is something old for something new.

The Trivium Arts

Pursuing the Trivium approach requires a bit of history. The Trivium refers to the three liberal arts, in Latin translation, the three roads which made up the Medieval curriculum: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. As Adler (1983) describes them, "grammar, logic, and rhetoric are the three arts concerned with excellence in the use of language for the expression of thought and feeling" (p. 23). The Trivium formed the foundation for the training of the mind (Joseph, 2002) prior to learning the Quadrivium, which included mathematics, music, geometry, and astronomy. Elements of the Trivium, especially classical rhetoric, trace back to Aristotle and the Greeks, as well as to Cicero and Quintilian during the Roman Republic. As the Trivium was applied, it stood for a curriculum more than a methodology, and it addressed a very practical concern in the classical age: how to train orators to deliver persuasive speeches in Latin (Corbett and Connors, 1999).

Classical education spanning from Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric* to Quintilian's *Education in Oratory (Institutio Oratoria)* and later to Erasmus's *On Copia of Words and Ideas* emphasized a study and imitation of models, principally works of the great orators from classical times, followed by instruction in general principles and techniques of the arts, with later practice of simple composition for writing. This composition practice was known as the progymnasmata (preliminary exercises) and the declamation or practice speeches (Corbett and Connors, 1999). Some of these methods may be more familiar with their more recent names:

- Study of models, or close-reading practice.

- Imitation of models, or paraphrasing and imitation.
- Instruction in general principles, or amplifying or expanding, reducing to brief summary, or rewriting in different forms.

Note that this author has chosen a few key methods from the Trivium, which form the Trivium arts described in the section heading.

Beginning with the study of models, the traditional exercise resembled what has more recently been called close-reading instruction. Close reading is an analytical exercise in which the instructor draws attention to the vocabulary, grammar, and discourse markers in a text. Rivers and Temperley (1978) used the term “intensive reading,” which they closely linked to “further study of grammar and vocabulary” (p. 225). In the classical tradition, close reading of a model text was viewed as necessary for understanding the architecture of a reading text: word choices, grammar choices, and the kinds of cohesive devices that form a paragraph.

Indeed, close reading is a valuable tool in helping students to recognize grammar and discourse features of a reading. In a community college class, however, close reading usually focuses on a reading no longer than a good-sized paragraph. The instructor proceeds through a series of questions on wording: What’s the topic here? Why do you think the author placed this word in this position? What are some synonyms for this expression? How can the word express a different tone? What if X had been used instead? Why use Y in this position? After that, the instructor proceeds to a series of questions about grammar features: What does this plural noun tell us? What tense is this in? Why does the author change tenses in this fifth sentence? What does this modifier tell us about the verb? The questions listed here are not exhaustive; there are, no doubt, other questions that can draw student attention to the language contents of a text.

Close reading lends itself to paraphrasing, or an expression of exactly the same meaning in different wording. Erasmus was famous for his example of paraphrasing in the *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, where he gave 150 variations or paraphrases of the sentence “Your letter has delighted me very much.” This author typically asks for three or four variations; however, during a whole-class demonstration generating ten variations that express the same meaning as the original can be a useful exercise. Paraphrasing a sentence demands careful attention to the structure, word usage, and tone of an original sentence. Paraphrasing as methodology, though, has some useful variations:

- Paraphrasing a sentence in a much shorter, abbreviated form.
- Paraphrasing from one form to another (e.g. paraphrasing an email message into a short essay; paraphrasing a visual or graphic data into

text; paraphrasing notes into a summary).

- Paraphrasing citations of other authors (as recommended above in the literature.)

Like the close reading activity, paraphrasing demands attention to grammar, vocabulary, and written purpose.

The use of imitation, or imitation of models, dates back to Aristotle, who emphasized the method in his *Politics and Poetics*. Since that time, a number of famous writers have noted its effectiveness, from Benjamin Franklin to Winston Churchill and others. But imitating is not copying. At one time copying may well have been the first step; in the past, few but the very rich or the elite could afford books. Most students would have had to copy text passages before imitating them. Still, the imitation technique refers to a very rigorous exercise in which a student takes a sentence or short paragraph and writes a similar one with different content. Whereas paraphrasing meant crafting the same meaning through different wording, imitating requires an application of the same grammar to produce new meaning. A simple way of looking at imitation is through what some writers have called framing, or developing a grammar cloze for a single sentence. Table 2 provides some examples of paraphrasing and imitating Erasmus’s original from above: “Your letter has delighted me very much.”

Table 2. Comparison of Paraphrases and Imitations

<i>Paraphrases</i>	<i>Imitations</i>
I enjoyed your letter.	Your gift has impressed me a great deal.
I really like the note.	Your card has pleased me very much.
That letter meant a lot to me.	The pictures have made me very happy.
Your words have really made me happy.	Your paper has disappointed me a lot.
I still feel moved about your note.	Your report has disturbed me for some time.

A single sentence for imitating, perhaps done as a class warm-up exercise, introduces a number of variants of use for students. One useful means for imitation is with a sentence frame, or creating a sentence cloze: placing blank lines or open spaces for content words while retaining the grammatical elements. For the above sentence, a frame would look like this: “Your _____ has _____ed very much.” A general procedure for imitating may have students first distinguishing the contents from the grammatical features (perhaps through underlining or highlighting) and then removing the content toward creating a frame. Finally, students can create new sentences with the original sentence grammar.

One important point requires attention. Nunan (1999) sums up concerns with applying imitation in the writing classroom. Nunan contrasts a reproductive language activity, which is where he would place these Trivium techniques, with creative language exercises. Naturally, the preference rests with more creative language use. All teachers agree on that point. Nunan describes creative uses as “the recombination of familiar elements in new ways” (p. 77). This author argues that this is exactly what is happening with paraphrasing and imitating: students become familiar with grammar and vocabulary and then either find novel ways to express the same meaning or novel ways to reuse the same grammar.

Though for the sake of simplicity the discussion has focused on sentences, short paragraphs of three to five sentences, including brief works showing cited materials with comments, can be very useful. Indeed, as the literature noted, many students need to work with citing material early. Showing how other authors cite material, use signal phrases, and make their own cases in reference to the cited material can provide useful material for paraphrasing and imitation. This author has found short paragraphs useful for further showing cohesive devices: the use of pronouns, synonyms, and transition signals (such as “however” or “furthermore”). Creating a cloze of these small paragraphs for imitation can generate much useful language for student writers.

To either paraphrased or imitated sentences, the third general set of methods easily applies. These methods include expanding the sentence or brief paragraph into an amplified or larger paragraph. In many cases, after a close reading or imitation, students have already discussed enough language to increase the size of the original work. Along a similar line, it may also be useful, following a close-reading activity, to reduce a work to a summary sentence.

Of final note here is how these methods have encouraged rich conversations in this author’s writing classrooms, which is also

recommended by Nunan (1999). It is often helpful to train students with a general process for paraphrasing and imitating, so that the activity provides a useful exercise done in groups. The set of methods in the previous paragraph also offer opportunities for group work. The exercises result in activities in which students engage in the language through the help of their peers, dissecting and recombining language elements to produce new meanings or sentence forms.

For this teacher, pursuing the Trivium has offered a means to address specific student concerns with sentences and grammar, while at the same time applying the insights from the literature reported. The Trivium's rhetorical methods have offered a means for addressing the issues pointed out in both. In the Trivium, the rhetoric was taught after grammar and logic as a presentation that demanded attention to language and thought in the packages of rhetoric. Wielded effectively, the methods presented here easily combine language, thinking, and written forms for academic writing.

Revisiting Horton

The Horton dilemma stands as a thinking-language problem. The Medieval Trivium, with its attention to rhetorical exercises, offers a way to help ESL writers achieve a state where they can express accurately what they mean, or bring intention, language, and written genre together in a more concise presentation. While this is rarely a smooth exercise for any writer, it is certainly a centuries-old problem. Horton's dilemma harks back to a distant age when student writers mastered expert models of writing to help them express themselves. What this teacher has found through his own classroom and literature review is that a pursuit of the Trivium helps to solve a practical concern for his ESL writers.

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