

***Transfer of Knowledge from First-Year
English Writing Classes
To Writing in the Disciplines: Case Studies of Writing
across the Curriculum***

***NEMOUCHI Abdelhak
HAMANI Nesrine
University of Constantine***

Abstract:

The present study sheds light on the advantages of the program designed to teach writing across the curriculum and tries to, as well, determine what features students should transfer while writing different assignments across different disciplines. The study is based on an analysis of a questionnaire administered to English teachers of different subjects at the Department of English Letters and Language, University Mentouri Bros, Constantine, Algeria. The selected questions try to examine first the students' writing performance, second if the writing rules are reflected in the students' assignments, or not, and finally how teachers define the term writing across the curriculum

Key words: Writing across the curriculum, writing rules, transfer, disciplines, and subjects.

المخلص:

هذه الدراسة تسلط الضوء على مزايا برنامج مصمم لتعليم الكتابة عبر المناهج الدراسية ويحاول، وكذلك، تحديد ما يتميز ينبغي نقل الطلاب أثناء كتابة المهام المختلفة عبر مختلف التخصصات. وتعتمد الدراسة على تحليل استبيان تدار على مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية من الموضوعات المختلفة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية الآداب واللغة، جامعة منتوري بروس، قسنطينة، الجزائر. الأسئلة المختارة في محاولة لدراسة أولا "أداء الكتابة، والثانية إذا تنعكس قواعد الكتابة في الطلاب الطلاب الواجبات، أو لا، وأخيرا كيف المدرسين تحديد المدى الكتابة عبر المناهج الدراسية

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة عبر المناهج الدراسية، وكتابة القواعد ونقلها والتخصصات، والموضوعات.

Introduction

The present article is mainly concerned with writing across the curriculum, and how deep is writing connected with other subjects. Writing has become a valuable tool nowadays as it engages students to think, create, communicate and write. Over the past ten years, it has increased in colleges, universities and secondary schools. More exactly, the writing across the curriculum program emerged in 1980 in American schools which advocated the incorporation of writing into all the classes and all the disciplines. It was seen as a means to help students learn materials and improve their thinking about ideas in the courses and develop their writing skills as well.

1.1. Writing across the Curriculum Program

The term writing across the curriculum has come to have a positive impact on writing, in its broad sense WAC means that students must be able to write in different specific

In 2008, The Center Writing across the Curriculum published an interesting article in which the authors suggested efficient ways and key notions about the writing across the curriculum programs:

- WAC programs discuss every day in class one form of writing as a mean to improve students' understanding and writing in each course.
- WAC programs promote the notion that teachers are considered only as an audience for their students' writing assignments.
- The WAC programs concentrate primarily on the students' final products and they increase, as well, the teachers' workloads.
- These programs are considered as a new efficient method to change the ways in which students' learn and instructors teach.
- WAC programs are an opportunity for students to revise many writing activities.
- The programs advocate a variety of writing assignments; sometimes short answers that do not require great effort thinking.
- The belief upon which these programs are built is that writing is integrated into all the disciplines.
- WAC programs claim for the clarity of expression and complexity of thought with an adherence to the conventions and mechanisms of writing.

The Michigan Science Teachers Association (MSTA) pointed out in 1987 that there are several strategies that teachers have adopted to the need of students to learn content and their need to practice writing in different contexts. These strategies are associated with WAC and underlie many principles as follows:

- Writing promotes learning.
- The integration of writing and the writing process promotes the students' participation and engage them into a critical thinking.
- The opportunity to write in every class develops good writers.
- Using writing as a part of instruction can be used in every classroom.

- Effective writing instruction integrates disciplines.
- By practising thinking and the writing conventions of an academic discipline, students will communicate effectively with that discipline (3).

According to McLeod (1992), a more recent survey found that fewer than 50% of all post-secondary institutions in the United States have WAC programs; in the space of a decade and a half WAC becomes a familiar part of the academic landscape. In 1991, Robert Morris produced a videoconference titled "Issues and Conflicts in WAC" which attracted a large audience in 48 states and in Mexico.

For Peterson (2010) the writing across the curriculum movement has a main goal which is the dispersal of writing throughout undergraduate education. This goal has both practical and theoretical reasons. For the practical ones, Peterson gave an example about the English department which assume that writing skills learned in freshman English need reinforcement. The theoretical reasons an example was given about writing which is considered as a mode of learning and undergraduate education need to introduce students to conventions of thinking and writing in various disciplines.

1.2. Techniques of Knowledge Transfer

Generally, knowledge transfer is defined as the key to transfer knowledge from one discipline to another; aims at examining whether or not students transfer different rhetorical strategies when completing writing assignments. Due to the complexity of writing, there are no exact or prescribed rules that ensure writing successfully in all the contexts; however, there are some techniques that may help students

to realize effectively the knowledge exchange across the disciplines. That is why a great importance has been given to the interdisciplinary approach which synthesizes more than one discipline; however, this approach provides many advantages as well as disadvantages as the interdisciplinary studies revealed.

From her study of transfer, Ford (2004), cited in Saenkhum's thesis (2007), revealed that in order to become successful writers in a new context, writers need to make reference to the familiar rhetorical strategies they have practised in previous texts. Therefore, students need to retain, review, and reproduce strategies learned in the previous context in order to apply skills from one context to another.

In addition to these rhetorical strategies, students need to possess, as Winterwod (1980) pointed out in Saenkhum's thesis, transferability of writing skills; that is to say, the writer's repertoire that includes both local and transferable skills. For the local skills explained Winterwod the writer has to deal with a given genre and involves his ability with vocabulary, special styles, and the specific tones that particular fields demand. The transferable skills, on the other hand, require the writer to deal with the basics of the writing including syntactic fluency, sense of audience, the ability to organize and the mechanics.

According to Jones (2010), the interdisciplinary method is considered nowadays as a key concept to the advancement of school curriculum at all levels; the concern now is to know whether or not this approach is the best course for a curriculum. Newell and Green (1982), cited in Jones's book, have defined the interdisciplinary concept as: "inquiries which critically draw upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights". Jones explained that the interdisciplinary approach differs from first the multidisciplinary one, which is concerned with the teaching of topics from more than one discipline in parallel to the other; second it cannot be considered as a cross disciplinary approach since the latter is about the cross of one discipline with the subject matter of another. In fact, the techniques involved in the interdisciplinary approach go beyond these two approaches because they allow student to see different perspectives, work in groups, and make the synthesizing of disciplines the main goal. Jones mentioned some advantages of the interdisciplinary approach such as expanding students understanding, achievement between all disciplines, and enhancing communication

skills. However, the latter approach has also few disadvantages as integration confusion and time-consuming curriculum preparation.

Among the techniques used to transfer knowledge across all disciplines there is one called “team teaching” that scholars debate about whether or not this method can be considered as the best technique for students’ progress? Jones (2010) claimed that this technique is often integrated within the interdisciplinary approach. Team-teaching is a technique in which teachers from multiple disciplines work with each other to design a curriculum, instruct the class, and arrange team of students for time periods that can possibly extend to more than one year.

Peterson (2010) suggested another technique which may be useful. She declared that the freshman English course can provide a major component of comprehensive writing program and if it is well conceived, it can then become the basis for subsequent WAC efforts. In general and in all institutions, she explained, freshman English course asks students either to read literary texts and write about them, then it represents writing as training in literary criticism, or it asks students to read and write contemporary prose forms such as the autobiographical essay, the character sketch, the cultural critique...etc, then it provides an introduction to nonfiction writing. However, if freshman English course asks students to read and write various academic genres, it may then provide a foundation for writing in the disciplines. Peterson considers this technique very efficient and important for both undergraduates who plan for their advanced work, and also for students who are less prepared and who need a general introduction to the feature of academic discourse. Walwood, cited in Peterson’s book, suggested that the English Departments should take a broad view at the English freshman course that includes linguistic, rhetorical, and textual studies.

Methodology

1.3 Data Collection

The present research paper involves a discussion about the WAC program and its advantages. To conduct such a research a questionnaire has been selected as a method of data collection. Our questionnaire was administered to the teachers of writing and of different modules at the University of Mentouri Bros. Constantine, Algeria. Teachers were asked first about their students’ performance in writing across different disciplines, and second to define the term

writing across the curriculum, and finally if students are transferring the writing conventions across the discipline, or not. The questionnaire comprises 24 questions and is divided into four main parts; however, only the fourth part suits our interest and was selected for the present study and which is entitled: The relationship between writing and other disciplines.

1.4 The Questionnaire Analysis

Question One: According to you, writing effectively across the Curriculum means:

Meaning of WAC	Number of teachers	Percentage
An improvement of the writing skills	3	7.89%
An improvement of the thinking skills	1	2.63%
A good use of the rhetorical aspects	1	2.63%
All combined	33	86.84%
Total	38	100%

Table 1: Meaning of Writing across the Curriculum

The present question enables us to gather the different definitions of how the term writing across the disciplines is seen by teachers. From the results we notice that a significant majority (86.84%) agree that it is a combination of all the features that we have proposed to the informant to choose from.

Teaching students how to write, at the university level, is a complex procedure which requires the integration of several actors all along the training process. Thirty-three teachers, out of thirty-eight, replied that writing effectively across the curriculum is a combination of an improvement of the writing and thinking skills, and an efficient use of the rhetorical aspects of writing. The achievement of these goals assigned depends enormously upon the good matching of the strategies adopted by teachers and the contents of the different subjects. Teachers should show a kind of interest in the students' use of the rules and techniques they learn; they should try to know if their students who manage to be good elements in their module, tend to be the same in other modules. If some students tend to be good in the writing class, but not in other modules, this can be seen as a failure as

they do not put into practice what they learnt during the writing class; and this is partly the teacher's fault. Consequently, teachers of writing and others of Linguistics, Literature and Culture must cooperate at different levels and must develop collaborative tasks, between full time and part time teachers, to ensure efficient students' achievements and productions across the curriculum.

Question Two: Do you think that if the writing conventions were taught efficiently, their transfer towards other subjects (modules) would be successful?

Efficient Teaching and Successful Transfer	Number of teachers	Percentage
Yes	33	86.84%
No	5	13.15%
Total	38	100%

Table 2: Efficient Teaching and Knowledge Transfer

An important item in this last section is seen as crucial since it answers positively the question we asked about whether efficient teaching of writing conventions would lead to a successful transfer towards other disciplines; this is the main concern of the present research.

A significant majority of the respondents (86.84%) confirm the issue. When students are taught all about the techniques of writing, it is obvious and legitimate to expect them to reproduce what they have learned whenever an occasion requires their use. When the most important number of features of writing can be taught and are clearly identified by the syllabus designer and teachers, the realistic idea of seeing our students transferring what they learned in writing to other modules may be reached.

It seems important to mention that the teaching of writing should not be limited to teachers of writing; instead, students should be taught in a way that provides them with enough competencies to approach writing and be able to write about any subject. Once writing teachers are aware of this, they can use a set of techniques and recommendations in each composition course to explain and convince their students that what they teach must be used in all writing situations.

Five informants among the rest replied negatively; two Adjunct teachers, two Magister A class and one Magister B class teachers; their answers will certainly not affect the results obtained, but we will try to explain their points of view. First, we may deduce that the five informants did not understand the question; second, they have no clear idea about what strategies to use to ensure a possible transfer across the curriculum.

Question Three: Do students show readiness for writing in your module?

Showing readiness for writing	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Yes	13	34.21%
No	24	63.15%
Sometimes	1	2.63%
Total	38	100%

Table 3: Students' Readiness for Writing in Others Subjects

It is clear from the previous answers that teachers are not satisfied of their students' level in writing. We consider it necessary to ask the following question, with three alternatives, to have an idea about the students' reactions when they are asked to write in different modules; this question concerns students, but it is addressed to teachers exclusively. From the teachers' answers, we notice that 63.15% choose "No" and only 34.21% answered "Yes"; whereas 2.63% ticked "Sometimes". This clarifies the fact that students are not motivated for writing neither in the writing sessions nor in the other ones.

The great percentage of teachers who ticked "No" option are mainly those of Written Expression, Literature and Linguistics. This can be seen as a handicap because students must know that writing is fundamental in every class that is why teachers of both modules should discuss to adopt a specific content which emphasizes some important aspects as a way to make their students motivated and able to write in all the modules. Teachers should not teach their modules as isolated subjects from the others; a clear and a total cohesion should exists between subjects belonging to the same unit of teaching. Teachers of linguistics and literature devote about half of their instructional time explaining and describing techniques of writing

which means that collaboration between the actors in charge of Writing, Linguistics and Literature is absolutely necessary.

Surprisingly, thirteen teachers have answered the same question positively. Those respondents are also concerned with teaching Written Expression, Linguistics, Literature and Civilization. After observing closely the informants answers, we may deduce that some of these teachers have their own strategies when teaching. The techniques used in class may be seen as efficient and helpful by these teachers and may serve as a means of gauging the use of the writing techniques across the disciplines.

Question Four: Are you satisfied with your students' level of writing compositions?

Teachers' Satisfaction	Number of teachers	Percentage
Yes	3	7.87%
No	35	92.10%
Total	38	100%

Table 4: Rate of Satisfaction with Students' Writings

The current question is supported by two alternatives "Yes" or "No". It seeks to measure the teachers' opinions about their students' level of writing compositions. From the results below we notice that 92.10% proved their total dissatisfaction with their students' level of writing compositions. At the university level, students are expected to write clearly and correctly at all levels, but obviously it is not the case. The reasons behind this poor level may be multiple as their lack of the components skills involved in writing such as: reading comprehension, writing mechanics (poor grammar, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation), organizing the ideas effectively, poor vocabulary, communicating clearly the message.... Etc. If students lack these components, their writings would certainly be unsatisfactory, and in many ways. Teachers should provide students with good and efficient supports to overcome these difficulties they encounter when they write.

these modules all the techniques and rules they learnt in the writing sessions.

Question Five: Do students show readiness for writing in your module?

Showing readiness for writing	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Yes	13	34.21%
No	24	63.15%
Sometimes	1	2.63%
Total	38	100%

Table 5: Students’ Readiness for Writing in Others Subjects

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Conclusion

The results of the present study point to one clear conclusion: teachers are not satisfied with their students' performance in writing. Of course, teachers are aware that there is a clear correspondence between writing and the other subjects, but one may say from the teachers' answers that students are not. Therefore, teachers should help students to succeed in creating a meaningful and an efficient curricular connection between writing and other disciplines.

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