

Graduate students' evaluation of the use of critiquing to teach academic language skills

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(Received 24 April, 2017. Published online 31 October, 2017.)

This paper investigates graduate students' views on the use of critiquing as an instructional approach to teaching academic language skills. It addresses three research questions: Do the students think that critiquing has enhanced their academic language skills? How effective do the students think the methodology is as a means of receiving instruction? And how relevant is the methodology to their professions? A questionnaire comprising 19 items was used to elicit data for answering the research questions from 10 graduate students who had been taught using the approach. Although the students reported that critiquing was unfamiliar, burdensome and emotionally trying, they, nevertheless, indicated that it is a viable teaching approach that addressed their longstanding academic writing needs and enhanced multi-faceted student-teacher and student-student interactions. They reported that they became more confident in expressing their opinions inside the classroom and in fora related to their professional engagements. The study notes that the search for instructional approaches to teaching academic language skills should be instructor driven and that students should have a sense of achievement and fulfilment as a result of the use of the teaching method.

Key Words: academic language skills, evaluation, critiquing, ESL, genre, graduate studies, instructional approach, peer interaction.

1. Introduction

This paper solicits graduate students' views on a teaching method problem succinctly encapsulated in the main research question: How should graduate students in a second language environment be taught academic language skills? The students' evaluation which constitutes the answer to this question requires, as background, a characterisation of their language skills; a specification of the context in which the skills are taught; and a discussion of critiquing, the method adopted for teaching the students. These preliminary issues are discussed in this section.

It has become evident that the graduate students, some of them teachers in tertiary institutions and secondary schools in Botswana and elsewhere in Africa, usually admitted into the programmes at the University of Botswana (UB), have inadequate academic language skills. Snow and Uccelli (2009) note the lack of such skills in other environments. The inadequate skills relate to the students' inability to write good academic essays, to present them, and to respond, critically, to such presentations by their peers and others. In fact, the students appear not to be cognisant of what presenting on assigned topics and commenting constructively on their peers' presentations entail. In view of this, the paper surveys the students' views about whether critiquing, the teaching method that the researchers have used in their graduate classes, has helped them to improve their writing and communication skills.

The use of critiquing to teach academic language skills was accomplished within the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course at UB. The course is an optional requirement for graduate students reading for the MA in English Language. Modelled along the Dudley-Evans and St. John's (1998) paradigm, it is similar in content to other ESP courses around the world. However, in view of the inadequate academic language skills already noted, additional emphasis was on ensuring that the instructional method translated positively into adequate students' writing and presentation competence. Accordingly, two objectives directly relevant to attaining the competence, to "analyse the language and other needs of specific groups of learners" and "research and communicate their (students') findings, using oral and written modes appropriate to academic discourse", were built into the course. In other words, in the context of this study, these objectives imply not only that the theoretical assumptions of ESP were taught, but also that the ESP class was constituted in a manner that addressed, practically, the graduate students' identified writing and communication needs.

Although generally used to support other teaching methods, critiquing, as already indicated, is the teaching method adopted for teaching the students. The main feature of the method is that each student writes 2–4 essays (depending on the number of students registered for the course) on predetermined topics and presents them at the appropriate time in a class seminar. The essays are assigned, bearing in mind Leki and Carson's (1997) suggestion that students should be supported adequately in the writing process by ensuring that appropriate source texts, among other things, that promote "linguistic and intellectual growth" (p. 39) are made available to them. Before each seminar, the essay to be presented is given to the writer's peers to critique. At the beginning of the course, the facilitator discusses how to write critiques with the students. Each student writes 4–10 critiques per semester (of 14 weeks). The students also present their critiques during the seminars. The facilitator grades all the essays and critiques as well as the oral presentations in order to ensure that the students take the writing and presentation tasks seriously. This teaching method was easy to adopt, as it is part of the seminar approach, the research-oriented graduate teaching method, adopted by the Faculty of Humanities. In the class, after the facilitator has introduced the concept, the main speaker presents its details (main points and arguments). The speaker's peers, thereafter, critique the essay and its presentation. And the facilitator moderates the discussion.

The main research question will be more elaborately examined in this paper under the following sub-research questions: Do the students think that the use of critiquing as an instructional approach has enhanced their academic language skills? How effective do the students think the method has been as a means of receiving instruction? And how relevant do the students think that the method would be to their professions?

2. Literature review

2.1. Insights from genre analysis

Genre analysis (Swales, 1981, 1990), which privileges social constructionism and which has been at the forefront of developing students' academic writing skills, is pertinent to the concerns of this paper, and it is in this respect that we provide a brief remark on its contributions. Its main aim (Swales, 1990) "is to offer an approach to the teaching of academic and research English" (p. 1) through the explication of three key concepts: "discourse community, genre and language learning". These three concepts highlight the need for interdisciplinarity, that is "openness to the approaches and insights of other fields" (Hyland, 2006, p. 392). In other words, genre analysis reveals the "genres and communicative conventions" (p. 400) defining "academic and professional communities" (p. 396). The awareness of the communicative conventions is then used, pedagogically, "to assist learners critique and participate in such communities" (Hyland 2006, p. 396). Dudley-Evans (2000, p. 4) rightly indicates that "the findings of genre analysis allow for greater sophistication in the examination of the writers' purpose".

With respect to the notion of discourse community, Swales' (1990) original formulation, which is still current in discussions of academic language skills at various levels (e.g., Berman & Cheng, 2001; Snow & Uccelli, 2009; & Uccelli et al., 2014) is that it:

... has a broadly agreed set of common public goals; ... has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members; ... uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback; ... utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims; ... has acquired some specific lexis; ... has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise (pp. 24–27).

As Dudley-Evans (2000, p. 5) argues, “the interest in discourse community and how the expectations and conventions of different discourse communities mould the text that they use” should be at the forefront of the discussions on how ideas are generated and facts disseminated. These facts have been reiterated in recent studies on academic literacies. For example, Guerin et al. (2017) address the question of “what constitutes good quality” academic writing (p. A88) and how such quality can be achieved through “effective supervision” (p. A88) by examining how institutions prepare supervisors for the challenging task of mentoring students in doctoral writing in Australian universities. We can infer from the study that graduate students need to be assisted to conform to the communicative conventions expected by the academic discourse community. Although they are not doctoral students, our respondents share, to some extent, characteristics similar to the doctoral students in Guerin et al. (2017), especially in terms of not meeting the expectations of the academic discourse community. The need to satisfy the academic discourse community by improving students' academic language skills is the reason why innovative instructional approaches of the type examined in this study are important. Fegan (2016) acknowledges this fact in the use of a variant of the Scholarly Writing Group, *Shut Up and Write*, that serves as “a writing oasis” (p. A20) that enables students pursuing a higher degree by research improve their writing. As Aitchison (2009, p. 906) observes, “the kinds of writing acumen needed for successful higher degree research go beyond subject and disciplinary knowledge to include an understanding of assessment and supervisory expectations, the development of particular scholarly identities, and a sophisticated awareness of how to project oneself within a variety of social, cultural and linguistic settings.” The need for this awareness is echoed in earlier formulations on academic writing. Torrance, Thomas and Robinson (1994), for example, note that the complexity of academic writing “requires a complex combination of generating ideas, selecting the ideas that are appropriate to the writing task, translating these into text and polishing the text to produce a presentable document” (p. 379). However, Aitchison's (2009) earlier observation rightly moves the discussion of genre beyond the narrow confine of examining only essay writing to include other skills associated with it.

From our perspective, therefore, seminar presentation is an important communicative event in the academic community and it constitutes an integral component of the graduate studies programme. As indicated earlier, one of the objectives in the programme designed for the students is to equip them with the relevant skills necessary to research and communicate their findings, using oral and written modes appropriate to academic discourse. Since research is dominant in the discussions on how ideas are generated or constructed and how facts are disseminated, and since our needs analysis shows that the students are neither able to make good seminar presentations nor comment constructively on their peers' presentations, adopting critiquing as an instructional approach in teaching them was an attempt at enhancing their language skills. In other words, as Bailey (2007) puts it, students will learn “how to use ... multifarious language functions and discourse structures – all for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills, interacting about a topic, or imparting information to others” (pp. 10–11).

2.2. Critiquing as a teaching method

There is a paucity of research studies which have used critiquing directly in teaching academic language skills. For this reason, this review extends to fields not directly related to language studies. But first, we provide a brief explanation of critiquing. It is a form of assessment just like reviewing. Unlike reviewing, however, it is an expert assessment which comprises the evaluation

of the topic, the evidence and the argument of the writing. We partly agree with the view that critiquing entails the “ability to critically appraise published research by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the research and forming judgements concerning its overall quality and applicability” (Caldwell, Henshaw, & Taylor, 2011, p. e2). In our view, it also involves unpublished writing, including students’ essays which are the focus of our study.

Critiquing is an instructional approach which is more rooted in the arts and design fields. In architecture, for example, it “is the predominant way through which architecture students acquire design expertise from their instructors” (Oh et al., 2013, p. 302). Essentially, the process of critiquing in the field entails students “working on and presenting their work (often publicly) and receiving feedback from the instructor and classmates.” Thereafter, the students reflect on and revise their designs (p. 303). Thus “critiques are an essential pedagogical tool in the design studio”, and they “are based on the instructor's expertise and professional experiences” (p. 303). Critiquing may therefore be regarded as a process of apprenticeship. It should be noted that critiquing has also been suitably used in other fields, as well, including nursing where it has been used to evaluate health research.

As an instructional approach, critiquing fits well into teacher research culture. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, p. 15) note that during the 1970s and 1980s, a paradigm shift in researching, teaching and assessing writing evolved, which entailed viewing the teacher as a “RE-searcher” (Berthoff, 1987, cited in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 15), “who did not need more ‘findings’ from university-based researchers, but more dialogue with other teachers that would generate theories grounded in practice” (p. 15). It is therefore not surprising that some scholars, faced with the challenges of teaching academic writing or dealing with students’ lack of requisite skills to write their academic essays have successfully used their “RE-searcher” reflection to integrate critiquing into their mode of instruction.

An important aspect of critiquing is peer review. Early scholarly work adopting the methodology has shown a divergence of perspectives between instructors and students on what makes scholarly writing effective. Koncel and Carney (1992) report that while graduate students of social work programmes perceive conciseness, use of correct terminology and following a prescribed format as indices of a sound academic paper, instructors/faculty considered advancing a solid argument backed by both theory and empirical evidence as more important. In a related study, Caffarella and Barnett (2000) researched doctoral students’ perceptions of the Scholarly Writing Project, SWP, which, according to them, had three objectives: “to investigate a specific area of interest focusing on the content of the class; to engage in the process of critiquing a colleague’s work; and to incorporate feedback from colleagues and instructors in preparing a formal academic paper” (p. 41). Their findings are quite illuminating; the students indicated that though they were apprehensive at the beginning and during the scholarly writing, “preparing and receiving critiques from professors and peers was perceived to be the most influential element in helping them to understand the process of scholarly writing and in producing a better written product” (p. 40). In addition, the students highlighted, according to them, “personalized feedback and the iterative or ongoing nature” (p. 47) of critiquing as the two major factors which enhanced their confidence in academic writing, notwithstanding that the process was both “highly emotional and at times frustrating” (p. 39).

More recent scholarly work also highlights the benefits of peer review and critiquing. Min’s (2006, p. 118) study examines “the impact of trained responders’ feedback on EFL college students’ revisions, both in terms of revision types and quality.” Noting that peer review/peer response offers a myriad of benefits, including learners’ development of “a sense of ownership of the text” (Tsui & Ng, 2000, cited in Min, 2006, p. 119) and “adoption of more positive attitudes to writing” (Min, 2005, cited in Min, 2006, p. 119), Min (2006) indicates that not much effort has been focussed on determining the extent to which peer review comments are utilised in subsequent revisions. Findings from her study indicate “that the numbers of total comments produced and those incorporated into revision after peer review training were significantly higher than those before training” (Min, 2006, p. 129). In terms of the proportion of peer review influence, she reports that not only was there “a significant difference between the total revisions writers made

before and after peer review training” but also that there was “a significant difference in the revisions as a result of peer feedback before and after peer review training” (p. 129). Her findings also show that trained peer review significantly improved “the quality of students’ revision” (pp. 129–130). As to the nature of the revision, Min (2006, p. 132) notes that such centred on reordering information to conform to the appropriate essay type format. This study thus confirms that learners who are trained to peer review and utilise feedback appropriately do improve significantly in their writing.

Aitchison (2009) examines the use of writing groups to address the writing needs of doctoral students. One related aspect of her study deals with “how learning to critique in a group context acts as a central pedagogy for learning to write” (p. 906). There are five major activities in the cycle of learning in the writing groups: a volunteer writes and circulates text stating explicitly the rubrics for feedback; text is peer reviewed, group discusses the text and feedback; the facilitator provides language focused input through a variety of mini activities such as scaffolding, modelling and explicit instruction and finally the author redrafts the text. (p. 911). In terms of what is learned, Aitchison (2009) further reports that the author of the text not only learns to write for a specific audience but also develops a ‘critical self awareness’ of their ‘strengths, weaknesses and needs’. The author also learns to “interpret, evaluate, synthesise and incorporate criticism” (p. 911). Peers in the group “learn to develop critical reading skills, analyse language and textual practices” (p. 911) and “analyse language for linguistic features and meaning” (p. 911). They also “learn to give and receive scholarly criticism and consolidate learning by extrapolating from one instance things that are relevant to their own writing” (p. 911). Both author and peers learn to “make and defend constructive criticism, deliver, negotiate and synthesise feedback and co-construct pieces of writing” (p. 911). Obviously, significant learning occurs in the writing process as attested to by both the author and the peers who critique. While the former learns to synthesise information from feedback and uses such to revise their work, the latter benefits by sharpening their skills of deconstructing a text and applying this skill in their own writing.

Fallon, Walsh and Prendergast (2013, p. 1) have aimed to devise a new method, which they describe as “activity based” to enable students to learn a set of research skills often perceived by them as ‘dry’ and ‘unexciting’, and to improve learner engagement. Among the activities employed in the research are workshops, presentations, written submissions and peer critiquing. In their study, peer critiquing, which was done in small groups, using a similar set of criteria as the actual one used by the lecturers, was restricted to the draft research proposals of the students. Each proposal received a written feedback and critique. While some students considered peer critiquing beneficial because it afforded them the opportunity to role play and become conversant with what assessors look out for, others were hesitant to “share ideas prematurely with their classmates” (p. 15). The students also considered critiquing extremely beneficial even though time consuming and emotionally trying. As we will demonstrate in our discussion, hesitancy seems to feature in students’ responses, especially when they have to venture into an unfamiliar territory which in our case is critiquing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Survey participants and sample size

The target population, former students, as already indicated, from which the study sample was ‘selected’, is 19. In view of this, it would have been ideal to study the entire population. However, not all members of the population were available for the study. Ultimately, only 53% (10) of the population was able to participate in it. Table 1 gives details of their gender and affiliations before they enrolled in the programme.

In all, 60% of the participants were female and 40% male. Also, 50% are in the teaching profession as lecturers/teachers. The others have diverse designations such as former students, fire fighter, translator and ICT practitioner. There is therefore sufficient variety regarding gender and work experience to ensure representativeness.

Table 1. Information about participants.

Designation	Gender	Affiliation
Fire fighter	F	Botswana Fire Services
Student	F	University of Botswana
Student	M	University of Botswana
Translator	F	Botswana Administration of Justice
Lecturer	F	Jwaneng Technical College
Lecturer	F	Botswana Secondary Colleges of Education
Teacher	M	Private high school
Lecturer	M	Botswana Secondary Colleges of Education
Self-employed	F	Internet service provider
Lecturer	M	Botswana Secondary Colleges of Education

The small data set raises pertinent issues related to reliability and validity (to be discussed presently), especially as “it is a widespread belief among researchers that the bigger the sample, the better the study becomes” (Hardon, Hodgkin, & Fresle, 2004, p. 64). The first point to note is that like many others, this survey involves both qualitative and quantitative data (Pickard, 2007). For qualitative studies, for example, “a sample of 10 per group” (especially in comparative studies) is acceptable, as “the validity, meaningfulness and insights from such studies have more to do with information richness and the analytical qualities of the researchers rather than sample size” (Hardon et al., 2004, p. 64). As would be seen in the next sub-section, the richness of the data has been assured by the nature of the questions the respondents were required to answer. The environment in which the study was conducted also has a bearing on the sample size. It is a second language environment in which low graduate enrolment is the norm. Insights from such environments cannot be discarded on the grounds of a small sample size. This is particularly so for this study in which the evaluation period spans 12 years, from 2003–2015, although it should be noted that there was zero graduate enrolment in some years. This long period gives this study the appearance of, to stretch the meaning of the phrase, ‘a longitudinal study’. In other words, in spite of the limitations of the sample size, the insights to be gained from the study are valuable.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Data collection was done by means of a questionnaire (see Appendix), which is considered to be one of the most important data collection instruments in social science research. In designing the questionnaire, the researchers were guided by two of the most widely accepted “truisms about effective questionnaire design” (Krosnick, 1999, p. 37): making sure its wordings are simple and the meanings imputed to them are unambiguous; and avoiding leading questions that show the researchers’ bias and that push respondents to give certain desired answers. In order to minimize bias and enhance its validity and reliability, the questionnaire was trialled. Dornyei (2007) rightly notes that face validity and reliability can be achieved through trialling a research instrument. For this reason, the questionnaire was initially administered to one of the former students. His responses enabled a restructuring that ensured that the phrasing of the questionnaire items was clear; that the questions were not leading; and that the responses elicited were detailed and specific.

All the questionnaire items are either open-ended questions or closed-ended polar questions, part of what Krosnick (1999, p. 38) describes as “acquiescence” questions, with auxiliary instructions that seek explanations or clarifications. The preference for these question types rather than normal closed-ended acquiescence questions that are popular in the literature is motivated. The popularity of closed-ended questions has to do mainly with the ease with which large data sets are coded and analysed (Krosnick, 1999). Conversely, coding and analysing open-ended questions for large data sets are usually a big challenge. However, that is not the case with the current study in which the

respondents are few. Therefore, analysing the data poses no great challenge to the researchers. In view of this, open-ended questions are preferred in this study mainly to ensure that detailed and specific responses are elicited.

The questionnaire is divided, appropriately, into five sections (see Appendix). Part A is introductory; it consists of questions that sought to ascertain the familiarity of the students with critiquing and the extent to which it has been used in their other classes as the main instructional tool. It was necessary to do this in order to test the claim that the researchers were introducing an innovative teaching method. Part B of the questionnaire sought to ascertain the benefits (implicitly compared to other methods) the students believe that they derived from the use of the method, especially with respect to productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading) skills. It was expected that a new teaching method and its successful deployment should be perceived as more efficacious than the methods previously employed. This is why questions related to the gains that accrued to the students as a result of the deployment of critiquing had to be included in the questionnaire. Part C ascertains the willingness of the respondents to use critiquing in their current or future professions. One of the aims of the ESP course is to ensure that those who take it not only improve their language skills, but are also able to impart the skills they acquire to others. Because of this, it was necessary to ascertain whether participants transferred such skills or were willing to do so. Questions related to this in the questionnaire are those that dealt with the transfer of skills. Part D solicits the students' evaluation of the instructors' use of the method in class. While the design of the study is that of evaluation, in the broad sense of the word, Part D of the questionnaire deals with the evaluation of the researchers' use of critiquing in class. Accordingly, questions related to the use of critiquing, the problems arising from its deployment and how these could be mitigated were included in this section. The final section, Part E, as with all good questionnaires, solicits additional information on any aspect of the evaluation not covered in the questionnaire. The section enables the respondents to freely comment on any aspect of the questionnaire, including those aspects that the researchers may have inadvertently ignored.

In analysing the data, the researchers paid considerable attention to perceptions on which a consensus, usually 50% or more of the participants, exists. However, dissensions, positive or negative, especially minority opinions were also noted and treated with the respect they deserve. Finally, percentile figures, consistent with the fact that this is partly a quantitative study, are employed in the discussion of responses section.

4. Discussion of responses

4.1. Critiquing and the enhancement of the students' academic language skills

This sub-section addresses the research question: Do the students think that the use of critiquing has enhanced their academic language skills? First, although not all the participants answered all the questions posed in this section, the unequivocal answer is in the affirmative. Second, the benefits listed by the participants are as diverse as the participants themselves. This speaks to the fact that in addition to the collective needs identified for the participants as a group, each of them brought to the learning process their individual needs and expectations. Third, the responses of the teacher participants are not qualitatively different from those of the other participants. Accordingly, no special attention is paid to the responses of either of the groups. We now address the responses of the participants.

The responses to the first question in the section, "What specific skill(s) did you acquire when you took the ESP course?", which all the participants (80%) except two (20%) responded to, amounted to a list of macro-skills: extensive reading (10%), listening comprehension/listening well (20%), speaking well/presentation skills (20%), analytical skills (10%), research skills (10%), creativity (10%) and attending to details (10%). This last item "attending to details" articulates with the adverb "well" in the list. This shows that critiquing enabled the students to listen critically for and to speak to or present details which they otherwise would have ignored.

The second question, which required the participants to indicate how critiquing enhanced their speaking and writing skills, is: How did critiquing enable you to develop your speaking and writing skills? One of the most cited productive skills is the logical sequencing of ideas and materials

which 50% of the participants indicated that they improved upon. This validates the use of critiquing in teaching the students, as the organisation of ideas has been a central theme in academic discourse, for some time (Hyland, 1996). Relatedly, two of the participants (20%) indicated that they enhanced their skill of formulating a thesis or point of view and keeping to it. They also reported that they acquired the specific skill of judging the relevance of the facts that can be used for supporting their thesis or main point (Caldwell et al., 2011). These reported gains are basic skills which the participants ought to have learnt from their first year English classes (Arua & Lederer, 2008) or as they progressed through their undergraduate programme. That they mention these micro presentation details supports the view that they have communication needs, which are similar to those of other graduate students elsewhere (Fallon et al., 2013). This has justified, as Fallon et al. (2013) did, the need for an adequate method for teaching the graduate students these foundational skills.

Equally important from the students' perspective were interactive skills. Unwillingness to participate in class discussions (including asking questions) has been identified as one of the most troubling aspects of English language teaching in African contexts (Arua & Lederer, 2008). However, according to 40% of the participants, they interacted more in class sessions. Increased interaction is what Bertholt (1987) refers to as more dialogue although her use of the phrase relates to interaction between classroom teachers and university based researchers. Nevertheless, in the classroom context, such dialogue between the facilitator and the students, as Bailey (2007) has indicated, is needed for the effective clarification of concepts. Two of the respondents in this study reported that the increased interaction emboldened them to overcome stage fright and criticise their peers' ideas. In addition, another respondent said that he developed a good attitude to critical feedback. Like the students in Fallon et al. (2013) who were hesitant and apprehensive to share their ideas prematurely with their peers, the respondents in this study were hesitant and apprehensive of providing critical feedback to their peers. This is not a surprise because the question of how to provide it without hurting the feelings of peers is a delicate one. In the end, the respondents learnt that in-class participation was an important academic exercise and that they should be accepting of others' critical opinions of their own work. This acceptance was aided by the realisation that different points of view and disagreements are an everyday phenomenon, particularly in the academic discourse community. In other words, some of the students learnt to relate their class work to everyday events and this led to the development of a good attitude to critiquing. Extensive in-class practice of critiquing, which one of the respondents noted, also had the effect of demystifying it.

The last two productive skills cited by the participants are editing skills (10%) and writing styles (10%). With respect to the first, the respondent enhanced her ability to make presentations which are grammatically correct and error free, using a composite of important vetting skills necessary for making coherent presentations. On writing styles, which are also directly related to presentational coherence, the respondent who mentioned it reported that critiquing enabled her to recognise and emulate logically sequenced essays with identifiable theses that are supported with relevant facts and details. There is certainly evidence of attempts at writing logically sequenced essays as this unedited introduction from one of the students' scripts shows:

This paper serves as a critique of (A's) work titled "ESP Evaluation". The author's objective was to discuss ESP evaluation in detail. This critique will therefore be based on firstly; the content of the paper; looking at both the positives and the negatives, secondly the paper's organization. Lastly the critique will be based on the overall presentation of the paper.

This excerpt relates to the fact that the student is aware of the communicative conventions, noted in Hyland (2006), of writing a critique. However, the claim that they write essays or make presentations which are grammatically correct and error free is not borne out in the excerpt. Nevertheless, there is an attempt at following the conventions of writing appropriate to a critique. It is important to note that critiquing combines the process and product approaches to teaching and learning. On the one hand, the respondent was able to exercise her awareness of the writing conventions by comparing and contrasting her individual writing style with those of her peers in class.

On the other, she, together with her peers, was able to compare and contrast her individual writing style against what we would like to describe as an abstract but ideal writing norm.

The next question is: How did critiquing enable you to develop your listening and reading skills? This required the participants to respond more specifically to the gains that they thought accrued to them in respect of the receptive skills of listening and reading. It is interesting to note that, in sharp contrast to the earlier report of one respondent citing it as a general (macro) skill, 60% of them (including the earlier reported individual) cited extensive reading as a more specific (micro) skill. Certainly, for study purposes in a college environment, the perception of extensive reading as a specific skill is motivated. That is also the case for this study, as the respondents indicate that this is a skill, arising from critiquing, that they have acquired.

An equally good number of respondents (50%) mentioned “*attention to the details*” of a listening or reading text as a receptive skill that they acquired. For both listening and reading texts, therefore, the listener and reader have to be able to get the gist and the details of the texts in order to critique them adequately. This is why note taking is regarded as a necessary skill in the high school and in Communication and Study Skills classes in Botswana (Sebina & Arua, 2014).

Related to attention to details is the relevance of the details which two respondents (20%) mentioned. The relevance of ideas, referred to in Torrance, Thomas and Robinson (1994) as “selecting the ideas that are more appropriate to the writing task” (p. 379), is especially important in the context of the respondents’ inability to recognise when facts gathered from the different sources are the same or different. This inability makes it difficult for them to synthesise the facts, and this leads, sometimes, to excessive repetition of the same facts or details in their essays or critiques. One respondent also reported the additional issue of recognising a writer’s sequencing of ideas, already discussed, as part of paying attention to the details of the reading or listening texts.

The fourth and final questions this section addresses are: What other associated strategies did critiquing trigger? And do you consider such strategies important? The strategies discussed here are certain basic or foundational details reported by the respondents, but which are not traditionally classified as productive and receptive skills. The skills discussed earlier are not included. The skills they indicate as important are analytical (10%), negotiation (10%), problem solving (20%), questioning (10%), research (50%) and team work (10%). The citation of research by many of the students may have been influenced by the fact that the MA programme in Linguistics is research based. The students’ seminar presentations in all the courses they studied entailed the search for information on a regular basis. Indeed, one of the respondents indicated that the research he did for his ESP assignments enabled him to understand the academic genre better. Enabling students to understand the academic genre, of which critique is a part, is one of the reasons why this study is important. It is also the reason why scholars such as Swales (1990, for example) have carried out considerable research on it. Another respondent indicated that these associated strategies can all be gainfully employed beyond the classroom. For example, negotiating, team work and problem solving are post classroom lifelong tools. It should be noted that the relevance of critiquing as a post classroom tool is discussed later.

4.2. The effectiveness of critiquing as a means of receiving instruction

The second main concern of this paper, the effectiveness of critiquing as a means of receiving instruction, is addressed in the questionnaire by three questions: How appropriately did the lecturer use critiquing in the ESP class? What are the problems associated with the use of critiquing and what are some of your suggestions for mitigating them? With respect to the appropriateness of the use of critiquing, all but one of the ten respondents indicated that the method was used appropriately. Amongst the reasons for this positive assessment are: that the facilitator planned the class well ahead and introduced the method in detail to the class; the facilitator insisted that students justify whatever stance they adopted on issues; the method generated follow-up discussions after each class and that the method guaranteed fairness and impartiality with respect to the assessment of the students. One of the students indicated that though the method was implemented thoroughly and that though they “*soon enjoyed it*”, it was “*at first difficult getting used to the methodology*”. Thus the students were initially resistant (Benesch, 2001) to the use of the method, because it was unfamiliar, but they gradually embraced it. On the one respondent who expressed

dissatisfaction with the use of the method, his assessment was premised on the fact that the essay questions assigned to the students for critiquing “*always looked ambiguous.*” In addition, he thought that the method could have been used alongside another. It is not unlikely that this view emanated from an orientation that considers the lecturer as a repository of knowledge, who should dominate the classroom and disseminate knowledge to the students. Nevertheless, the student’s view deserves the remedial attention of the researchers.

The problems the respondents associate with the use of critiquing are many. The first, which has been noted in a number of places in this paper, is the reluctance to give and to accept negative feedback. This reluctance arises partly because it creates tension amongst students. One of the respondents indicates that

It is a method which need to be used with mature people. Even with us it was not easy. Sometimes after class you would hear someone saying “as for you, you always see something wrong with my work”.

The reluctance also arises partly from the perception that critiquing is used for evaluating poorly prepared essays. The second problem is that the method is perceived as burdensome. Expressions of the difficulty its use entails are indicated in the two excerpts below:

It is a good methodology (that) can be effective. However, it can put a lot of strain on the students.

This method requires students who are self motivated and not those who need to be forced to do their work.

Implicit in these excerpts is the view that the method requires a high work rate from the students, which is, apparently, not the case when some other teaching methods are used. The third problem is that the method could engender low self-esteem in a student, as a result of negative feedback, whose effect a respondent described graphically as “*a massacre of the writer’s ego*”. The effect of negative feedback is certainly a major issue with the respondents, for as another notes, “*it will be like, why work hard because no matter how I try, my work is always dismissed*”. It is interesting to note that while the respondents in this study were preoccupied with the effect of critiquing on them, those in Caffarella and Barnett (2000) were frustrated by their inability to resolve “*contradictory feedback from faculty*” (p. 46). For our respondents, the issue of low self-esteem cannot be ignored, as it may account for why our students, particularly in the undergraduate programmes, are reluctant to participate in class discussions. They are reluctant to express their opinions because of the fear of being ridiculed by their peers. That such a negative attitude still exists among graduate students is a concern. This implies that problems peculiar to different student groups would need to be addressed before critiquing can be used as an effective pedagogical tool. The fourth and fifth problems are that critiquing may not be suitable for teaching large classes, and that both the presenter and those critiquing were hard pressed for time. As indicated earlier, quite a number of the respondents are teachers in public high schools who are confronted with extremely large classes. Their concern that critiquing may be unsuitable for large classes is a genuine one. But the problem of large classes does not apply to our graduate level courses. Nor does the problem of being pressed for time arise in such classes. For example, in the classes in which the respondents were taught, time was not a constraint. In a class that runs for 120 minutes, together with a health break of 10 minutes, the main presentation is allotted 30 minutes, peer critiques 40-50 minutes and the facilitator’s presentation 30 minutes. The facilitator has the responsibility of ensuring that learning takes place as they, among other things, summarise, broaden and explain the teaching points. In other words, the teaching process is rightly elaborate and, in terms of time, bears no resemblance to what happens in a 30 minute seminar or conference presentation.

The major suggestion that the respondents made for mitigating the problems highlighted above is to raise awareness on the purpose and value of critiquing as well as to explain the method thoroughly to the students prior to its use. They also suggested that lecturers should be supportive by being patient, encouraging and motivating to mitigate the effect of low self-esteem. To use critiquing in large classes, the respondents suggested splitting the classes into smaller groups. Finally, they suggested that the facilitator should take time to discuss specific assignment topics with the students before they write on them. While it is unclear what kind of discussion is expected, this suggestion should perhaps be understood in the context of our students’ perception of

teaching and learning: they expect to be spoon fed. This perception is incongruent with the philosophy of graduate studies programmes in which students are required to demonstrate a reasonable level of independence in their learning.

4.3. The relevance of critiquing to the respondents' professions

The last research question this paper addresses is: How relevant do the students think that the method (critiquing) would be to their professions? The specific questions in the questionnaire related to this main question have been grouped into three. The first, a summary of two related questions is: Is critiquing a method you would use to teach college or high school students productive and receptive skills? The question also extends, appropriately, to a third one, the teaching of academic writing, as the method was employed to teach the respondents the subject. As there is no qualitative difference between the responses they provided for the general question on receptive and productive skills, on the one hand, and academic writing skills, on the other, the responses to the questions have been discussed together.

All the respondents except one, who was concerned that its use would create fear and tension in class, affirmed that critiquing is relevant to their professions. As 50% of the respondents are college lecturers and high school teachers (and 20% are likely to enter the teaching profession after graduation), this means that they (would) deploy it as a teaching method in their classes. The reasons they adduce for its (possible) deployment relate to the benefits (some of which have already been discussed) derivable from it: listening attentively, learning different writing styles, developing problem solving and research skills, anticipating critical inquiry, interacting more, reading extensively and inferring better. The one point, uncertainty about how the method would work in large classes, which seemed to bother one of the teacher respondents has been addressed adequately earlier.

More specifically, the teacher respondents believe that critiquing would enable their students to express diverse points of view, determine the relevance or authenticity of theirs and others' points of view and embolden them to speak in class and in public. It would also improve their writing styles in that it will make the students think about how to make their essays concise and precise, and how to sequence and connect their ideas (Koncel & Carney, 1992). They also believe that their students are more likely to pay attention to feedback from their peers. These are the same benefits that they reported that the method enabled them to acquire. Finally, the teacher respondents echo the view that the consistent use of critiquing, in line with Caffarella and Barnett's (2000) finding, is good for them and their students. For the former, it would serve as a diagnostic tool they would use to unearth the individual and collective language weaknesses and strengths of their students. And for the latter, as already indicated, it would help to produce confident, active and responsible students who would understand that they have something to contribute to the learning process.

The respondents were asked to indicate whether they thought critiquing had any practical application beyond the classroom. All of them, including the individual who would not use it to teach answered in the affirmative. One of the respondents used the phrase "*lifelong skills*" which, in our view, summarises the other opinions expressed by those who provided reasons for their affirmative answer. Although these factors have already been mentioned, it is nevertheless noteworthy that 50% of the respondents (teachers and others) listed as part of their lifelong skills, the ability to speak and express their opinions, and generally interact at public fora without feeling intimidated or threatened. This implies that critiquing has enabled them not only to overcome their unwillingness to participate in class activities, as reported in (Arua & Lederer, 2008), but has also enabled them to graduate into expressing their views on a wider scale. Relatedly, one respondent said that it enabled her to appreciate other people's perspectives or points of view (in workshops and conversations, etc.). In addition, 20% of the respondents said that they now engage in reflective and critical thinking. On this last point, the respondents thought that they could reason better than they did in the past. Generally, then, it is clear that the use of critiquing has had a profound effect on the manner in which many of the respondents engage with their professions and the world.

The final issue to be discussed in this section is whether the respondents are willing to share the insights they gained from the use of critiquing with their professional colleagues. Some (30%) did not respond to this questionnaire item. There was also a dissenting voice that cited lack of interest from colleagues as the reason why she would not bother with sharing the insights. The others, however, reported that they would do so formally and/or informally. Some (30%) would share the insights informally in teacher staff rooms. Staff rooms, usually arranged, according to the subject specialisations of science, humanities and social sciences, house about 10–15 teachers. Informal discussions take place in them on a regular basis. Some respondents (40%) would share their insights formally in workshops, seminars and departmental meetings. One respondent indicated that he would share it in teacher initiated self-help workshops such as those periodically organised by the Gaborone Cluster of Senior Secondary Schools in Botswana. Sharing insights at departmental meetings is appropriate, as students' performances and lecturers' teaching methods are hotly debated during examination meetings, especially when students' performances are poor.

5. Conclusion

We provide a brief word on our insights into some of the pedagogical issues raised by this study. First, an unfamiliar, apparently burdensome teaching method was enthusiastically endorsed, embraced and adjudged by the respondents to be an efficacious method of dealing with their longstanding academic language and communication needs. Second, the search for instructional approaches to teaching academic language skills needs to be instructor driven, based on the instructor's (research) knowledge, teaching experience and the students' needs, among other factors. Third, (initial) resistance to a new teaching method does not necessarily imply that the method is bad or unworkable; it may imply unfamiliarity, as was the case in this study. Fourth, students' views on the workability of a teaching method, would need to be ascertained either while the class is in progress or at the end of it, as is the case with this study. Finally, the students must have a sense of achievement and fulfilment as a result of the use of the teaching method. The students whose views were canvassed in this study appear to be satisfied that some of their communication and language needs have been addressed using the critiquing approach.

Certainly, critiquing, as our findings have shown, offered the students both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. Intrinsically, the students believe that critiquing helped them to develop all of the micro productive and receptive skills discussed above. In particular, they express satisfaction with improving their written (in main essays and critiques) and spoken (in presenting their essays and critiques) English; becoming aware of the importance and necessity of (diverse) points of view; supporting points of view with credible, relevant details; and appreciating different writing styles, among others. The students also express satisfaction with the attributes they acquired, one of which is ownership of the learning process manifested in independent study of the subject matter. Extrinsically, the students also believe that they acquired valuable assets which are transferable to their professional/academic work beyond the classroom, particularly when they write their research projects and make presentations at different fora. For this reason, the respondents believe that critiquing should be the main teaching method in their graduate research courses.

Appendix: Using Critiquing to teach academic language skills in a graduate ESP class

We are investigating the use of critiquing approach in teaching academic language skills at the University of ... and this questionnaire is designed to collect data for the study. As someone who had been instructed using this methodology, we will like to solicit your responses. We appreciate your taking out time to answer the questions below as candidly as you can.

Thank you.

Arua E. Arua & Modupe M. Alimi

Questions

A Student's perception of the methodology

1. Explain the extent to which you are familiar with critiquing as a teaching methodology?
2. Did you think you needed to learn the skill of critiquing or was it a lecturer imposed methodology?
3. Which other lecturer/s during your undergraduate or graduate programme used the method to teach his/her course?
4. What distinguishes critiquing as a method of teaching? Give reasons for your response.

B Benefits of the method- Skills acquired

5. What specific skill (s) did you acquire when you took the ESP course?
6. How did critiquing enable you to develop your speaking and writing skills?
7. How did critiquing enable you to develop your listening and reading skills?
8. What other associated strategies did critiquing trigger?
9. Do you consider such strategies important and why?

C Application of skills – Skills transfer

10. Is critiquing a methodology you would use to teach high school students reading and writing? Give reasons for your response.
11. Is critiquing a methodology you would use to teach high school students listening and speaking? Give reasons for your response.
12. Is critiquing a methodology you would use to teach college students academic writing? Give reasons for your response.
13. Are the skills you acquired through critiquing of practical application beyond the classroom? Give reasons for your response.
14. What specific areas of literature teaching could benefit from the methodology?
15. How are you planning to share the insights you gained from the use of critiquing with your colleagues?

D Evaluation of the method

16. How appropriately did the lecturer use critiquing in the ESP class?
17. From your observations, what are the problems associated with the use of critiquing?
18. What are some of your suggestions for mitigating these problems?

E General Comments

19. Please comment on any other aspect of critiquing as a teaching methodology.

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