

## LIN205H1S-Winter 2017-Writing Development Initiative

### Prepared by Dr. Safieh Moghaddam, course instructor

#### 1. What we did

The following are the four dedicated writing assignments that we were able to offer (above and beyond the rest of the course work) thanks to WDI funding

Writing task	Extra support	Words/Sentences	TA
<b>Writing complete sentences:</b> answering short answer questions		100	30 hrs (3 assignments X 4 TAs)
<b>Diagnostic writing (responding to a writing question)</b>	This task was completed at the end of the first tutorial and was used as a teaching tool to get an idea of what writing skills our students already had coming into this course. By evaluating their paragraphs, we were hoping to be able to help our students to work on the skills needed to meet the course objectives.	8-12 sentences	32 hours
<b>Quiz#1</b> (writing a whole paragraph+ identification of the different elements of a paragraph including the topic sentence, supporting details and the conclusion)	<p>Instructions to write a whole paragraph were provided by the course instructor through interactive tasks and activities during the lecture. These activities and tasks include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Activity#1:</b> The students were given a paragraph whose topic sentence was missing. Then they were asked to work with a partner to create a topic sentence for the given paragraph.</li> <li><b>Activity#2:</b> The students were asked to identify two sentences that did not support the main idea of the paragraph. In other words, they chose the sentences that did not belong in the paragraph.</li> <li><b>Activity#3:</b> The students worked on a scrambled paragraph with their partner. They were asked to rearrange the paragraph using their knowledge of cohesions, transitions, etc.</li> <li><b>Activity#4:</b> The students were given a paragraph in which the sentences were in logical order. However, transition words were missing. They were asked to give the paragraph a logical organization using appropriate transition words.</li> </ol> <p>In the end, they were given a short lecture</p>	8-12 sentences	42 hours

	on how to write and structure a cohesive paragraph.		
<b>Quiz#3</b> (rearranging a scrambled paragraph and adding connecting words+ punctuating a whole paragraph)	In other lectures, the students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. became familiar with the different elements of a paragraphs.</li> <li>b. were given some instructions on proper punctuation including the use of commas and semi-columns.</li> <li>c. worked on correcting errors including fragments, run-on sentences and comma splices.</li> <li>d. learned about different types of sentence structures including compound, complex and compound-complex sentences.</li> </ul>	8-12 sentences + punctuation of a 250-word paragraph	42 hrs
<b>Final exam</b> (punctuating a whole paragraph)	The students practiced punctuation during the last lecture. There was also a lab seminar run by the course instructor the day before the final exam. During the lab seminar, the instructor reviewed punctuation rules to prepare the students for the final exam.		10 hours (instructions + grading the exam)
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>156hrs</b>

2. How did it work? What do you know about the project's results with regard to the learning objectives from objective testimony (e.g., analysis of student writing produced)?

As mentioned above, once the overall learning objectives for the course were identified, the next step was to develop a diagnostic writing task which was used as a teaching tool to get an idea of what writing skills our students already had coming into this course. Based on this task, we could identify strengths and weaknesses in our students writing early in the course. After analyzing their diagnostic writing and receiving feedback from the TAs, we noticed that our students had trouble in creating an outline and structuring their thoughts. There was also a lack of logical connection between the sentences they had created. In other words, their writing lacked coherence (lack of transition words). We categorized these problems into:

- a. No development or depth of ideas
- b. Lack of logical connection between sentences (absence of transition words)
- c. Poor basic writing mechanics

The only way we could determine whether or not our students had learned something was to observe some form of behavior that would show learning had taken place after completing the diagnostic writing task. For this course, that behavior was to develop a well-structured paragraph with possible logical connection between sentences and the correct use of transition words and phrases by the end of the academic semester. We observed this behavior through giving our students two writing quizzes after they received the detailed

**instructions in the lecture (please see the above table for different types of activities and instructions used during the lecture). After the first quiz, we noticed a significant difference between the results of the diagnostic writing and the results of the first quiz in terms of learning objectives. Their writing was more structured, and we could clearly see improvement in the way our students had started or ended their paragraphs (e.g., the presence of a topic sentence and a conclusion) or had structured their work (the presence of supporting details in the body of the paragraph). One other area of improvement was the use of punctuation. Due to time constraints, we could only focus on the use of periods, commas, and semicolons. We noticed fewer fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices in our students writing after they learned the proper rules of punctuation. The students also showed more improvement after we analyzed the results (overall average) of the second quiz and the final exam.**

3. How did it work (subjective)? What do you know about the project's results with regard to the learning objectives from subjective testimony, potentially including 1) instructor's assessment, 2) TA assessments, 3) student assessment?

**To better measure students learning, I worked closely with an experienced lead TA to design and create quizzes and more formative feedback rubrics. We used a variety of strategies to measure the students' writing skills including the diagnostic writing, writing quizzes, in-lecture and in-tutorial writing tasks, correcting errors, and punctuation practices. To ensure consistency, I and the TAs set up two benchmarking sessions and met to discuss the grading rubric for each writing task/quiz. In the end, I tried to reflect on my own teaching with regard to the writing component. As stated earlier, the instructional team noticed an obvious improvement in the students' writing skills, in particular the structure of a paragraph, the use of transition words, and proper punctuation. However, the instructional team definitely believes that:**

- a. **more time and thought were needed to respond to students' writing.**
- b. **the allocated time for quizzes during the tutorial was too short. Based on our previous experience with writing courses, it takes approximately 40-50 minutes for the students to create an outline and write a well-structured paragraph. However, in this course, due to time constraints, our students had to write a paragraph in 20 minutes at the end of the tutorial.**
- c. **for this course including the writing component to succeed, there is a need for a (slight) course redesign in a way that our students can receive more explicit and direct instructions on writing a paragraph/longer texts and more constructive feedback on their own writing. This will include the modification of the grading rubrics as well.**
- d. **The quizzes should be designed in a way that can be completed within a shorter period of time (or more time will be allocated to complete the writing quizzes in the tutorial).**

**Throughout the course, the students also shared their ideas and concerns with the instructional team. They mentioned how much the writing component had helped them express their ideas more clearly and coherently. However, they wished that they had been**

**given more time to complete the writing assessments. As well as our students, the instructional team found evidence of overall improvement in the students' performance.**

4. What have you learned? What worked best? What didn't work? What do you know now that you didn't know at the start of the year? How do you feel overall about the project? Did it accomplish the goals that motivated you to propose it?

**The instructional team truly appreciates the support of including a writing component as part of LIN205 course. It has helped the original course design to become richer and more challenging. Teaching writing as part of this course showed me how things that seemed very easy for me might be very difficult for my students. In the end, I realized that designing writing assessments with detailed rubrics, working with the TAs and the students and grading their written work require more careful thinking. Despite my experience with teaching writing courses at other institutions, I realized that for this course (compared to other writing courses), the students should get gentler but still rigorous instructions and directions. Moreover, I believe that the instructional team has to work collectively on students' general writing skills as well as basic rules of standard English grammar since the students cannot write an effective piece without knowing basic English grammar rules. This includes the use of passive voice, dangling modifiers, compound and complex sentences, etc. This understanding comes from the fact that most of our students mastered the structure of a well-written paragraph. However, grammar errors made it difficult for us to understand and communicate with their work. Therefore, we learned that our students need to develop both skills to be effective writers.**

5. What would you change? 1) Do you intend to run this project again, and if so, will there be 2) changes to the course and/or 3) changes to the project based on your experience running it?

**We do intend to run this project once again. There are certain things that we would like to change and consider in future offerings of this course with regard to the writing component. These are the questions that we would like to consider:**

- a. **Do our students understand the purpose of the writing component before taking the diagnostic task and other writing assessments? In other words, do our students know what the learning objectives of the writing component are?**
- b. **Do our students understand the terminology used in instructions?**
- c. **Do our students know the importance of citations? And have we included proper instructions for quoting and citing?**

**We would also like to consider the followings:**

- a. **Have we adequately stressed the importance of proofreading and spell check?**
- b. **Have we provided enough resources and references for their basic writing problems?**
- c. **Was there enough positive feedback and words of encouragements on their assessments?**

- d. Was there a clear and detailed grading rubric for each assessment?**

**Moreover, the instructional team believe that in future offerings of this course, we can make the following changes to improve our students' learning experience:**

- a. Make the instructions in quizzes, tests and exams more explicit and clear.**
- b. Create an online forum (e.g., discussion boards) where our students can share their concerns and ideas with regard to the writing component of the course and receive feedback from the instructional team.**
- c. If possible, have students (in small groups) post short paragraphs on the online forum and ask for peer review.**
- d. Direct students to available online and on-campus resources.**
- e. Post more instructions and manuals in order to help students better understand the materials.**
- f. Identify and document the common writing problems (error patterns) among our students on a more frequent basis and find the best solutions to help them overcome those problems.**