

An Account of Using “StemWishees” in an Insessional’ Class

Firstly, to clarify what I mean by ‘insessional’ class in the title, I should explain that these are language support classes offered free of charge to (primarily) international students at U.K. higher education institutions in the hope that they will prove beneficial for them in their studies. The particular course I was teaching was called “Excellence in Writing” and this was the third week of a ten week course.

In the following class, I attempted to use material from the “Stem Wishees” site with two primary objectives. The first was to make students aware of the site’s existence and thereby to promote its use. The second was to raise students’ awareness of the different genres of writing that they might be expected to write at university, and also for them to notice useful vocabulary and expressions from the extracts selected.

The class was taught in the multi-media language laboratories here at Queen Mary in the second semester of 2012, and the class profile was very mixed. As with most insessional classes at this time of year, attendance was erratic and the class contained students with very different levels of English, who were at very different stages of academic attainment. On the day I taught the class, there were five students present. One was a PhD student from Colombia (in the first year of his PhD) in Materials Science; two students from Kazakhstan, one in the first year of his BEng. in Electronic Engineering, the other in the third year of her BSc. in Computer Science; a Korean student doing a BEng. in Electronic Engineering and a Chinese student doing a BSc. in the same subject.

It was a two hour class and the main aims of the class were to raise students’ awareness of the six ways of creating cohesion in text, using activities based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). The students were asked to colour code texts to highlight the way cohesion was created. These activities were computer based, using the “Cohesion and Coherence” learning object in “Academic English Online”, which is an online resource of ‘English for Academic Purposes’ materials, which is situated on our college intranet (although it may soon be accessible to a wider audience through the BALEAP website, to members of BALEAP – The British Association of Lecturers in Academic English). There were also some preliminary paper based exercises on using linking expressions taken from “Inside Track: Successful Academic Writing” (Gillett et al. 2009). In retrospect, I was probably trying to do too much in one class by also trying to incorporate the “Stem Wishees” materials as well.

The procedure I followed, before the class, was to take extracts from the Wishees site. I chose these extracts because the “Excellence in Writing” course is streamed into different ‘Pathways’ and this was a ‘Science and Engineering Pathway’. I therefore selected disciplines in which I knew that the students were studying and selected from different levels of academic attainment to reflect the mixed composition of the class.

Subsequently, I then pasted the extracts selected into an interactive whiteboard and then used the same colour as the background to 'blank out' the source of each of these extracts on the IWB. After this, I exported the screens as a .pdf. and in class sent this document to the students' computers. I then asked the students to copy down the information about the possible sources from the board, which were randomly ordered and labelled "a.-f.". I did this so that they could look at the extracts on their screen whilst simultaneously looking at the list of their possible sources, on paper, on their desks. Therefore, the students were essentially doing a matching exercise. They then worked in a pair and a three to read through them and decide which extract came from which source. Typical questions that I asked of them included: Which extract came from the Conclusion? Which came from the Discussion Section? Which came from an Extended Abstract? Which from the Aims and Objectives? Which was Undergraduate and which at Masters' level? Which came from a Research Project? Which was from Electronic Engineering? Which one was studying Computer Science? Which one was studying Medical Engineering? Of course, crucially, I also asked after each of these questions: How could you tell? Therefore the students were looking at both content and discourse to decide. When the students (with some prompting) had successfully matched the extracts, I elicited from them which key vocabulary and phrases had enabled them to do the matching exercise successfully. They were then sent the URL of the Stem Wishees site and encouraged to explore it further for homework.

To sum up, I planned this class because I was enthusiastic about the site and wished to share my new discovery with my students. However, if I were I to teach it again I think the whole class could have been profitably spent on analysing these different genres of academic writing as preparation for this final matching exercise. As I believe the theme of creating cohesion did not 'marry' very well with this final activity. Furthermore, some of the language could be confusing for the students in the matching activity. For example, in the source with the "Discussion Section", the author wrote, "the purpose of the report is to...", which naturally led some of the students to match it to the "Aims and Objectives" source. Elsewhere, the Medical Engineering source talked of "cells", which led some to match it to the Biology source. However, there was a great deal of interest created by this matching exercise, and when I checked the following week all the students had been exploring the Wishees website and were ready to report back. With more careful planning and better preparation, I think there was potential here for a successful lesson.

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References

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