Applying the Onion Model to Scaffold Writing Development in IS Courses

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Recent information systems (IS) curriculum guidelines emphasize the importance of writing skill development (Topi et al., 2010). Although IS faculty are expected to take an active role in the development of students’ writing abilities (Pomykalski, 2006), this is a daunting task for professors who lack explicit knowledge of the various rhetorical moves that are accepted within their specific discourse community. In this study, an interdisciplinary collaboration between IS faculty and applied linguists was carried out in a first-year course about core concepts of IS at a branch campus of an English-medium American university in the Middle East to: (1) unpeel the different discourse patterns involved in the case analysis genre, (2) revise the professor’s writing assignments to make his expectations more explicit, and (2) develop writing workshops aimed at strengthening students’ skills in scholarly writing. The case analysis genre involves examining a case, identifying an organization’s problem(s), and proposing an IS solution through stages of analysis and recommendation (Forman & Rymer, 1999). The valued linguistic features of the case analysis genre were identified through: (1) interviews with the IS faculty, (2) think-alouds where the IS faculty read and commented on student writing from previous semesters, and (3) detailed analysis of the linguistic resources present in higher-and lower-graded assignments. These data informed the re-design of the assignment guidelines and the scaffolding materials for a writing workshop delivered in class. Our approach to scaffolding writing in the IS classroom is grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based genre pedagogy (de Oliveira & Iddings, 2014) and the Onion Model (Humphrey & Economou, 2015), which discloses the discourse patterns that students need to master to generate successful academic genres across numerous disciplines. Our analysis of the students’ case analysis writing reveals more evidence of analytical writing compared to a previous semester where no writing workshops were offered.

Based on the positive outcomes of this collaboration and with the aim of tracking and reinforcing the development of analytical writing across courses in the IS program, we are currently collaborating in other IS classrooms to investigate other types of genres such as project reports and case development exercises. This model of collaboration between English faculty and disciplinary faculty can be useful in meeting the needs of the increasing number of linguistically and culturally diverse students in IS education. Thus, we argue that collaborations like this are needed to help disciplinary teachers scaffold L2 writing development. Such a model of collaboration can have a positive impact on teacher development and student writing outcomes.

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