




Do WAC/WID Strategies Strengthen Communication Skills for Multi-lingual Graduate Students?

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How do multi-lingual graduate students learn to write and present well?

- Context: At MIT, there is no consistent, institution-wide approach to supporting graduate student writing and presentation skills.
 - Faculty agree high-quality communication is essential in graduate school.
 - The undergraduate program---highly successful—is WAC/WID based.
- Students have to seek various options:
 - Advisor mentors student communication tasks;
 - Advisor refers the multi-lingual students to a generic course;
 - Department develops *ad hoc* solution;
 - Student relies on peer support;
 - Student finds his/her way to the writing center.



Data from two departments and several groups of students helps us understand what is ‘useful.’

- Three cases:
 - Case 1: Two cohorts of multi-lingual students learning skills for their oral qualifying exams in a short workshop series.
 - Case 2: Multi-lingual students in a practicum, practicing a research talk for their oral qualifying exam.
 - Case 3: Three cohorts of multi-lingual students in a distance environment learning to write their theses.



Main message: Multi-lingual graduate students find WAC/WID strategies very useful.

- Students in 3 cases indicate preference for process-based, interactive pedagogy.
- Involvement of disciplinary faculty is highly valued.
- Multi-lingual students need linguistic and organizational support when writing in addition to a process-based approach.



Case I: Two cohorts in a short workshop series (2008)

- Context: Master's students in Dept of Aeronautics/Astronautics at MIT must pass a qualifying exam that is both written and oral.
 - Modeled on the genre of the conference paper.
- Workshops were developed and implemented by the communication instructor with the guidance of multi-lingual graduate students.



Workshop series targeted specific skills and practice.

- Week 1: Overview of basics: introductions, audience analysis, style and tone, ‘top down’ organization. A didactic presentation.
- Week 2: Summarizing previous work and making critical evaluation. Critical reading of models
- Week 3: Presenting data and using connecting phrases to navigate the discussion. Making claims about data. Active learning with models.
- Week 4: Short student practice presentation of a data graphic created for their oral qualifying exam.

Student ratings of workshop elements

Element	Cohort 1 (n=8) Percent that rated this element as “very useful	Cohort 2 (n=12) Percent that rated this element as “very useful
Overview of basics	28%	27%
Summarizing previous work; making critical evaluation	28%	18%
Presenting data, making claims	57%	36%
Practicing presentation of a key graphic for their oral exam	71%	54%



What students said about what they found useful:

- *I like the actual practice especially at the last class.*
- *... practicing...*
- *... practicing useful wordings.*
- *..I believe we should have practiced in each class.*
- *... first lecture was too basic. Practicing was better.*




Case 2: Students practicing their qualifying presentations with engineering faculty and peers

- Context: To receive more disciplinary feedback on their qualifying talks, students volunteered to give their talks before an audience of peers and a faculty representative.
 - Practice-based, not didactic
 - Verbal and written feedback from peers and communication instructor;
 - Verbal feedback from engineering faculty.

Student ratings of the elements of the practicum (2008*)

Element	“very useful” (n= 13)
Practicing in front of peers and faculty	80%
Receiving verbal comments from engineering faculty	80%
Receiving comments from communication faculty	70%
Answering technical questions from peers and engineering faculty	90%

* Practicum ran for four years; this data is from 2008.



Case 3: Three cohorts of master's students in a thesis writing seminar

- Context: Mechanical engineering graduate students in the Singapore-MIT globally networked learning environment must complete a thesis in a 1-year master's program.
- A thesis writing seminar offers support as students write theses, using a WAC/WID-based approach.
 - Targeted instruction, working with disciplinary content and faculty, draft and revision cycles, writing conferences, peer review

Student ratings of less active seminar elements, 2008, 2009, 2010

Element	2008 (n= 15) “very useful”	2009 (n=13) “very useful”	2010 (n=17) “very useful”
Lectures via video	26%	29%	30%
Reviewing thesis models	26%	33%	29%
Reviewing lecture notes online	13%	15%	23%

Student ratings of more active seminar elements: 2008, 2009, 2010

Element	2008 “very useful”	2009 “very useful”	2010 “very useful”
Writing conferences with communication instructor	66%	74%	76%
Drafts commented by communication instructor	84%	76%	100%
Verbal suggestions from thesis advisor	73%	58%	83%
Drafts commented by thesis advisor	85%	64%	90%



What students said about the thesis writing seminar, 2008-2010

- *.. learned a lot from conference with(writing instructor) and drafts returned by her and by (thesis advisor).*
- *... like the writing conferences*
- *...I like (the) weekly exchange with advisor.*
- *... comment and feedback from (writing instructor) and our advisor are very helpful.*
- *.. suggestions from thesis advisor are so useful.*



What did students report as “difficult” about writing their theses?

- In general, students did not target specific thesis sections as “difficult.”
 - Some did report difficulty in using sources or theoretical background to support their methods (2009, 2010).
- But all 3 cohorts reported difficulty at the organizational and linguistic level.

Case 3: What students report as “very difficult.”

Element	2008	2009	2010
Using correct grammar, punctuation, spelling	30%	30%	24%
Choosing right words	46%	45%	41%
Writing clear and concise sentences and paragraph	62%	61%	65%
Organizing complex material	58%	61%	65%

Does WAC/WID-based practice address the difficulties that multi-lingual students report at the organizational and linguistic level?



In closing, WAC/WID strategies do seem useful to multi-lingual graduate writers and presenters.

- Interactive, process-based strategies are highly rated.
- The engagement of disciplinary faculty is highly valued.
- However, a WAC/WID approach should include more support for specific linguistic and organizational challenges.

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- For questions or comments,
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