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 1: 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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>“very useful” (n= 13)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practicing in front of peers and faculty</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving verbal comments from engineering faculty</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving comments from communication faculty</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering technical questions from peers and engineering faculty</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>2008 (n=15) “very useful”</th>
<th>2009 (n=13) “very useful”</th>
<th>2010 (n=17) “very useful”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lectures via video</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing thesis models</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing lecture notes online</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Student ratings of more active seminar elements: 2008, 2009, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>2008 “very useful”</th>
<th>2009 “very useful”</th>
<th>2010 “very useful”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing conferences with communication instructor</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drafts commented by communication instructor</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal suggestions from thesis advisor</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drafts commented by thesis advisor</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.”

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using correct grammar, punctuation, spelling</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing right words</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing clear and concise sentences and paragraph</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing complex material</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
For questions or comments,
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