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Constructing a Thesis-Writing Workshop

Abstract: The Bocconi University Language Centre was tasked with constructing a thesis-writing workshop for L2 students submitting their Master of Science thesis in English. The Language Centre explored what was expected from a university-sponsored workshop, which elements of thesis writing to cover, and which elements of Academic English to address. Three characteristics of workshops were identified: a short duration, focus on the development of specific skills and knowledge, and a focus on attendee interaction and participation. The focus on the development of specific skills and knowledge led to a workshop structured around six principle sections of a master's-level thesis: the Abstract, the Introduction, the Literature Review, the Methodology, the Discussion and Analysis, and the Conclusion. Additionally, three aspects of Academic English were woven into the structure of the workshop: academic vocabulary, signposting, and paragraph development. The Effective Thesis Writing Workshop was presented to students as a series of four ninety-minute sessions.

Key words: thesis writing, academic English, workshop

Introduction

Recently, in response to requests from the growing number of students submitting their master's thesis in English, Bocconi University in Milan,

Italy, decided to institute an “Effective Thesis Writing Workshop”. At Bocconi, as in most Italian universities, degree programs are largely organised around a three-year degree (Bachelor of Science / *laurea triennale*) plus two-year (Master of Science / *laurea magistrale*) system, with degree programs taught in either Italian or English. The university requires that all master’s students “present and defend their written thesis before the Degree Assessment Board” in order to obtain their degree.

The “Effective Thesis Writing Workshop” was conceived as a simple way for Bocconi’s Language Centre to offer support to students who need to or have chosen to present their thesis in English¹, rather than their mother-tongue. And yet, the planning and construction of the workshop rested on the answer to three “unsimple” questions:

- What is the nature of a workshop, and how is a workshop different from traditional language courses?
- Which elements of writing a thesis should be prioritized?
- Which classroom or self-study activities should be included in the workshop?

Discussion

What is a workshop?

Organizationally, the Language Center needed to offer the thesis-writing support outside of curricular courses, which at the master’s level focus on Business English and Professional Development. This requirement was an important element in the initial decision to use the ‘workshop’ label. Within, the university structure, however, ‘workshop’ is not a term of art, and so there were no preconditions for defining what a workshop could,

1. Bocconi students studying in English must submit their thesis in English, while students studying in courses taught in Italian have the option of English or Italian.

or could not, be. This gave the workshop designers (including the author), in consultation with university administrators, the flexibility to define the parameters that best matched the university's objectives and conditions.

While 'workshop' does not have a precise meaning at Bocconi, the university – as one of Italy's most important business universities – is well-familiar with management techniques such as running workshops for employees. Bocconi's sense of the characteristics of a workshop was confirmed by the use of the term at other universities throughout the world. While individual universities certainly use the term to suit their own needs, three common themes emerge:

- Workshops are of short duration (for example at Oxford University "The workshops are short-term, structured and agenda led", <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/counselling/workshops?wssl=1> and University of Sydney "Workshops are intensive two-to-three hour sessions, with some running over several weeks", <https://sydney.edu.au/students/learning-centre/learning-centre-workshops.html>),

- Workshops focus on the development of specific skills and knowledge (University of Manitoba: "Improve your research and writingskills with free workshops from the Academic Learning Centre", <http://umanitoba.ca/student/academiclearning/workshops/> and University of Cincinnati "Success Skills Workshops are one-hour sessions that focus on skills students need to be successful in college (study skills, note-taking, motivation, etc.)", <https://www.uc.edu/learningcommons/successskillsworkshops>),

- Workshops center around attendee interaction and participation (University of Leicester "Full of useful information, tips and practical exercises", <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/workshops> and University of Houston "Active learning environment – allows interaction between classmates and peer facilitators", <https://www.uh.edu/nsm/scholar-enrichment/workshops/workshops-faq>).

Each of these themes coincided with Bocconi's goals for the project.

The first condition established for the project was that the offering needed to be short. At Bocconi, language courses are either semester-long or year-long courses, but as the project was conceived to be extra-curricular, there was little support for such an extended commitment on the part of either the Language Centre or the students. The short-term nature of workshops made the label attractive right from the beginning.

As the offering was targeted at a specific audience – L2 students writing their master's thesis in English – the characteristic of focusing on specific skills and knowledge also appealed. There was no necessity (nor desire) to create a broad “Academic English” syllabus; the designers could target specific areas of thesis writing for development, consistent with the available time.

Finally, the teaching staff at the Bocconi University Language Center has been committed for years to promoting student-centered learning, and the hands-on nature of workshops made the adoption of a workshop framework a natural extension of the language center's teaching practices.

Choosing the Objectives

Writing a master's thesis is a complex enterprise, requiring an array of language skills, organizational skills, and critical thinking skills. As it was not possible to design a program that would provide practical experience in all of those skills while at the same time respecting the limited duration of the workshop framework, we began to look for ways to prioritize and select the skills we would address in the workshop.

We began first with an informal assessment of what Bocconi master's students already knew of the thesis-writing process. As the workshops would be open to both first-year and second-year students (of a two-year programme), it was assumed that not all the attending

students would be familiar with all that is involved in writing a master's thesis. Thus, we felt it important to give students experience with the structure of a thesis, and the various sections they need to produce in the course of writing their thesis. Consultation with the staff of the university library highlighted the fact that very often Bocconi students are not aware of the importance of the Literature Review to their master's thesis, and that they do not always recognize the amount of time needed to read through the necessary research.

One objective of the workshop, therefore, was to give the students familiarity with the principal sections of their thesis (Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion and Analysis, and Conclusion). A second objective was to give them exposure to the type of academic reading they would be doing during their research, and to use samples of this academic reading as models for the type of writing expected in their thesis. The third objective given was experience with producing Academic English.

In the initial planning stages, the duration of the workshop had not been finalized, and it was felt that these three goals offered the flexibility to expand or contract the activities done in the workshop to match the chosen timeframe. In the event, Bocconi decided to schedule three two-hour sessions.

Structuring the Workshops

In the course of determining the structure of the workshop, one characteristic that was notable was the emphasis on the student-centered nature of good workshops. The designers were not interested, therefore, in simply telling students how to structure their thesis. One blog post by author Scott Berkun (2013) became a touchstone in the development of the workshop program, in particular Berkun's Rule #3 — "Work the triad:

explain, exercise, debrief". This rule will not be new to most teachers, of course, but was a clear reminder that most of the limited time available for the workshop had to be taken up with the students doing things and then reflecting on them, and not on teacher talk.

That limited amount of time also made it important to send the message that these sessions were not like typical lectures where students would be absorbing knowledge. The first step therefore was to construct an introductory student-oriented activity, even before the instructors began talking about the thesis-writing process. We decided to address head-on the question of familiarity with what is entailed in writing a thesis, inviting students to discuss with their partners their experience with writing academic papers in English, reading academic articles in English, whether they had started to develop the research question they would attempt to answer in their thesis etc. The students were then asked to present what they had learned about their partner to the class.

It was decided to model the overall structure of the workshop around the venerable 'Hamburger Method' of essay writing. More metaphor than method, the hamburger method asks students to imagine the body of their writing as the meat in a hamburger, and the introduction and conclusion as the buns (Beare, 2018). In addition to adding a visual element to the thesis-writing process (most Bocconi students can readily picture a hamburger in their minds, and 'Hamburger Method' graphic organizers are plentiful on the Internet, this metaphor offered three advantages. First, it allowed us to divide the various sections of the thesis into three categories: top bun (Abstract, Acknowledgements, Contents, Lists, Introduction) meat (Literature Review, Methods, Results Discussion & Analysis) and bottom bun (References / Bibliography, Appendices, Glossary, Conclusion). Second, it allowed instructors to make the point that while the meat is the most important part of a hamburger, a poor bun can lower the quality of an otherwise

good hamburger. Finally, the metaphor afforded us the possibility of organizing the sessions around the meat (two sessions focused on the Literature Review and the Discussion and Analysis) and the buns (one session looking at the Abstract, the Introduction, and the Conclusion).

In choosing to organize the workshop around the structure of the master's thesis, we were confronted with the question of how to integrate into that structure work in Academic English. As noted above, Bocconi students attending degree programs taught in English must submit their thesis in English, regardless of mother-tongue. In order to enroll in these programs, students must demonstrate that they have, at minimum, "a B2 general level in English" (English Entry Requirements...). But, while many of the students in Bocconi's English-Language Master's of Science programs have prior experience studying in English, such experience is not a prerequisite for participating in the program. Indeed, given the extra-curricular nature of the workshop, an informal assumption was that many of the students choosing to attend would be students without much prior experience in the extended research and writing required to prepare a master's thesis. And while the English-language skills of the students enrolled in the Master of Science programs ranged from that "B2 general level in English" to mother-tongue, it was also assumed that a certain percentage of students attending the Thesis Writing Workshop would be students looking to improve their English-language skills, as well as learning how to write a thesis.

At the same time, students in Italian-Language Master of Science programs also have the option of submitting their thesis in English, which reinforced our belief that we could not take for granted students' prior experience in academic research and writing in English, nor could we ignore that for at least some of the students this workshop represented an opportunity to expand their ability to use Academic English.

For these reasons, we were determined to include elements of Academic English in the Thesis Writing Workshop. As noted earlier,

along with work on Academic English and on the major structures found in a master's thesis, another objective of the workshop was to give the students exposure to the type of academic reading they would be doing in the research of their thesis. Structurally, it was easy to connect this exposure to the goal of exploring the sections of the thesis by simply matching sections and samples and excerpts. (In other words, during the discussion on abstracts, students would be asked to interact with abstracts from a variety of authentic texts etc.)

By using the same strategy, we were able to use samples and excerpts to highlight the elements of Academic English we had chosen to include in the workshop. The workshop would be organized around the sections of a thesis, with Academic English "interludes" woven in that would focus on a single aspect.

The first element of Academic English included in the program was vocabulary. Students in the workshop, after all, would be encountering and producing tens of thousands of words in the writing of their thesis. The limited time available and the fact that Bocconi offers 13 different Master of Science programs made it unfeasible to include targeted work in the domain-specific vocabulary the students would need, but we could target a generalized, productive, list of academic vocabulary.

Returning to the concept of a workshop teaching participants to do something, we thought it was important to 1) show students that there is a group of vocabulary items repeatedly found in academic writing and 2) show them resources they could refer to after the workshop had ended. Averil Coxhead's Academic Word List (AWL) satisfied both conditions. Through a series of cloze and other vocabulary activities using the samples and extracts of authentic academic writing chosen to highlight the sections of a thesis, we were able to demonstrate to student how often words from the AWL are used in Academic English. Through Dr. Coxhead's resource page (<https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/>

resources/academicwordlist) students have ready access to the word list; there is also a wide range of AWL activities available on the internet, which allows students to practice and increase their familiarity with the list outside of the sessions of the workshop. Thus, while there are valid alternatives to the Academic Word List, we felt that it was the most appropriate source for explicit vocabulary work in the workshop.

The second element chosen was signposting. In deciding which signposts to focus on – given the time available there was no question of guiding students through a comprehensive survey – we started by dividing the signposts into two general categories: organizational signposts and logical signposts. In the organizational signpost category we included not only concepts such as sequence (*first, next* etc.) and conclusion (*In conclusion, finally* et al.) but signal phrases (phrases used in citation, such as “*Conroy (1945) illustrates that ...*”). In the logical signpost category, we included concepts such as cause and effect, concession, comparison, explanation, to name but a few. We then looked to identify those concepts with two characteristics: they were pertinent to the process of thesis writing and they were concepts that students would plausibly not have as much experience working with in English.

In the end, we identified three areas of signposting to include in the workshop: signal phrases, which we included in the section on Literature Reviews, and two broad logical areas which we felt integral to the higher-order critical thinking skills necessary for an effective master’s thesis. The first, which we labeled “E3”, focused on signposting examples, explanations, and elaboration. Elaboration, a somewhat more abstract concept than the other two, is the movement from general to specific, the exploration of a point in more detail. (*Australia is trying to kill you. And it is coming to get you from more than one direction. In fact, it is home to gigantic crocodiles and killer jellyfish, poisonous snakes and even more poisonous octopuses, deadly spiders and nasty bull sharks.*)

The second broad area was labeled “C/cr”, and focused on two areas of counterargument: concession (nevertheless, still etc.) and rebuttal, which often relies on a contrastive turn (*However, the opposite is true*). Both E3 and C/cr were included in the Discussion and Analysis section of the workshop.

The third element chosen was paragraph development. Each of the workshop designers has more than twenty years’ experience teaching ESL/EFL at university level. One constant in our experience has been the very different ways students approach paragraphing. And, from the number of references to paragraphing found in university writing guides targeted at native-tongue writers, it seems evident that this variation is not limited to L2 writers.

In “*Style: Lessons in clarity and grace*,” Joseph M. Williams (1990, p. 92) talks of paragraphs as a discussion of an issue. In the workshop, we used that imagery to highlight that well-structured paragraphs are more than a collection of sentences grouped around a topic. There are different models of paragraph development, but as we had limited time to explore and practice, we chose to introduce students to the TEXAS model. Here, students are presented with a model paragraph containing a Topic (which is the same as Williams’s ‘issue’), Evidence & eXamples, Analysis and So what (sometimes referred to as ‘summary’).

One point about paragraphs often overlooked by Bocconi students is that the complement of the paragraph is the paragraph break. So care was taken to include model TEXAS paragraphs that were relatively short, demonstrating to students that it was not a necessary component of academic writing that the discussion part of the paragraph stretch over what Steven Pinker (2014, p. 145) has referred to as “massive slabs of visually monotonous text”. We also included prompts in the debriefing activity connected to the paragraph-development activities that encouraged students to consider the effect of overly-long paragraphs on their readers.

Conclusion

The workshop described above was eventually packaged into four 90-minute sessions (see appendix). As the workshop has only been run once since its development it is too soon to judge its impact on the English-language theses submitted to Bocconi's Master of Science program. But anecdotal responses from the students involved in the workshop have been positive, and there are plans to make the Effective Thesis Writing Workshop a regular offering of Bocconi's Language Center.

Appendix

Effective Thesis Writing Workshop Program

Session 1

- Warm Up - Discussing Your Thesis
 - a conversation on your experiences with your Thesis and with academic reading and writing in general
- Part 1: Structuring Your Thesis
 - a look at the different sections of a master's thesis
- Part 2: Developing Your Paragraphs
 - exploring TEXAS

Session 2

- Part 1: Reporting on your research — Literature Reviews
 - how to concisely report what you found in your research on the topic
- Part 2: Academic Vocabulary — The Academic Word List
 - Becoming familiar with the words you will be using

Session 3

- Part 1: Discussion and Analysis
 - Talking about what you found and what you think of it
- Part 2: Signposts

- Connecting your ideas

Session 4

- Part 1: Writing your Abstract
- Part 2: Writing your Introduction
- Part 3: Writing your conclusion

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