Preparing learners for the academic world – Robert McLarty

I asked a group of English teachers recently why they asked their students to write essays. At first they were surprised at the question but slowly they began to offer answers. They felt that the essay was the perfect form format for a student to show proof of understanding of a particular topic and evidence of an ability to evaluate and judge a particular aspect of that topic, in other words concrete evidence of higher order thinking skills. When I then asked them how they marked those essays and what criteria they used, form and style seemed much more important to them than content. I pointed out that both content and language are on show in any essay.

Getting this balance right is one of the hardest things we have to do when preparing students for the academic world. Obviously most language teachers will be more concerned with the English level of the essay than the content because that is where our skills lie, but for the students the content will soon be king. It is vital that we help them write essays which reflect their ideas and illustrate their thinking rather than teach them to write a whole series of paragraphs starting with topic sentences sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion. Even if the stylistic features are written in the correct academic register the essay has no value without signs of original thought.

This is quite a difficult issue to get across to international students, particularly those who come from a culture where repeating the given wisdom and regurgitating what the teacher says are the normal route to a good mark. Universities all over the world are including critical thinking in their mission statements but there is little chance of students developing such skills if there is no chance to challenge the written and spoken word of the supposed experts. We have a great opportunity within the English teaching world to encourage this among our students by using some of the following techniques or activities.

- Encourage sharing of ideas. Point out that all ideas are modifications and extensions of previous ideas. The greatest philosopher arrives at their viewpoint by evaluating, contradicting, finding flaws in and rephrasing other opinions and views.
- Encourage collaborative approaches to research, presentations and essays. For essays the process can involve planning, brainstorming, researching, drafting and editing in groups of two or three. This joint approach helps students realise the benefits of listening to others but also of challenging them. The development of collaborative skills actually enhances their own independence as they learn to back their own judgment.
- Encourage a deeper understanding of texts by discussing the background and context, the stance of the author, the opinions in relation to other writers and what percentage of the article or essay is opinion as opposed to facts.
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A lot of your students will never have done this before but they will benefit greatly from it. When it comes to marking written and spoken work, make sure the class have a say, that they understand the criteria and that their opinions count. Again this will develop a feeling of collaboration in the class which will stand them in good stead later.

Mentally your students are going to need to be tough to maximise the benefits of an English-speaking higher education so you will also need to work on their independent study skills. Those who find reading difficult will have to monitor their reading practice. By noting how quickly they are completing pages and how fully they are understanding them they will realise how much more practice they need. It sounds hard but reading is a skill requiring a lot of individual practice, just like learning a sport, you have to put in the hours. All learners need to develop their vocabulary noting skills so that they have a system which is easy to revise from and one which ultimately allows them to add the required number of new items to their active vocabulary. As the teacher you can show them different ways of noting new words and introduce them to apps like Quizlet, but ultimately they are responsible for their own vocabulary growth.

None of the above should put your students off but making the most of an opportunity to study in English is more than just a good IELTS score. Help them as much as you can but really stretch them because in that way they will be ready for what is potentially a life-changing experience. They need to be ready linguistically, culturally, intellectually and mentally. It is worth it.

Robert McLarty runs his own consultancy, McLarty Languages Ltd. He is a coursebook writer, an EAP teacher and is the Senior Tutor for the Oxford Teachers’ Academy. He is Editor of Modern English Teacher magazine. He has run language schools in Paris and Oxford and worked for Oxford University Press for ten years.