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Using Criterion in an English for academic purposes course

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English for Academic Purposes (EAP Writing) is a compulsory course for English literature and language students at Obirin University. The first semester focuses on expository writing, typical of the TOEFL® writing exam. The second semester focuses on writing about literature. To facilitate their writing all students are provided with a user account for Criterion, a web-based essay management system. Essays submitted to Criterion are evaluated by computer, and returned to the writer in approximately one minute. Submitted essays are kept on the Criterion server, where they can be accessed and evaluated by teachers, and further revised by students. This paper will present an overview of the Criterion essay management system in the context of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Writing course. We will discuss student and teacher productivity, providing feedback on student writing, using corpus linguistic techniques in conjunction with Criterion, and learning outcomes.

学問的目的の英語” (EAP)のライティングの授業は桜美林大学の英文科、英語学科の生徒にとって必修科目である。作文能力の向上のため、Criterionを導入し、全生徒にインターネットを利用したライティングの指導を実施している。Criterionは生徒の作文を診断し、またTOEFLのTWEの評価基準に基づいた評価も行う。この論文は、どのようにCriterionのシステムがEAPのライティングの授業で活用されているかについて報告する。

This paper will present an overview of the Criterion web-based essay management system¹ in the context of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Writing course. We will discuss student and teacher productivity, providing feedback on student writing, using corpus linguistic techniques in conjunction with Criterion, and learning outcomes.

Overview of the EAP writing course

English for Academic Purposes (EAP Writing) is a compulsory course for approximately 180 second-year English literature and language students at Obirin University. The course was started in 2004 to develop students' academic writing skills, particularly expository essay writing. In class, students practice generating ideas, outlining and mapping, composing drafts, and revising. The first semester focuses on expository writing, typical of the TOEFL® writing exam. The second semester focuses on writing about literature.

Overview of Criterion

To facilitate and manage their writing all EAP students are provided with a user account for Criterion, a web-based essay management system developed by ETS, the company which creates the TOEFL® and TOEIC® tests. Essays submitted to Criterion are evaluated and scored by computer, and returned to the writer in approximately one minute. Criterion provides diagnostic feedback on grammar, punctuation, style, and organization. In addition, essays are given a score of 1 to 6, based on the criteria used in the TOEFL® Test of Written English. Submitted essays are kept on the Criterion server, where they can be accessed and evaluated by teachers, and further revised by students. Teachers can attach comments or corrections to essays which appear the next time a student logs on.

Productivity

Criterion can greatly increase both student and teacher productivity. During the first semester, each student wrote five essays with an average of 9 revisions per essay. The ease with which teachers can access essays in progress and type feedback allowed instructors to assign a much larger number of essays than would normally be possible with a class size of 28 students. In addition, the automatic scoring was motivating to students. Their natural desire to improve their score encouraged them to revise much more often than we have seen in pencil and paper based writing courses.

Using Criterion to give corrective feedback

This section will discuss ways in which teachers can use Criterion to build on their approach to second language (L2) writing, specifically as regards the provision of corrective feedback.

Corrective feedback in L2 writing pedagogy

Perhaps the most widely known method of providing feedback is using written comments. Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) examined Japanese university students' writing in four different conditions of written feedback (overt correction, coding of errors, highlighting of errors, and providing error counts) and found that writing practice over time resulted in gradual increases in accuracy and complexity regardless of the feedback condition. While written comments seem unlikely to accelerate grammatical development, research suggests that teacher commentary can lead to effective revisions on drafts and promote writers' self-editing skills (Ferris, 1997, 2001).

Another method, student-teacher writing conferences, may be more likely to lead to interlanguage development because conferences encourage students to negotiate meaning

with their instructor. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) provide an overview of writing conferences, allaying criticism and offering suggestions relevant to the logistics, content and dynamics of student-teacher writing conferences.

Feedback in the EAP writing course

The following suggestions are intended to show how Criterion can be used in a manner consistent with the approaches to error correction outlined above.

Write comments

Criterion enables instructors to attach comments to a particular essay, which may direct attention to important feedback, provide encouragement, and address essay content. All comments are retained at the end of each essay and provide a useful record of student progress, as well as a check on whether advice is being understood and followed.

Insert pop-up notes

Pop-up notes allow instructors to link their written commentary to particular parts of an essay using hypertext. Notes can be created and then stored in a pop-up notes library where they can be conveniently accessed and reused. On the other hand some instructors feel the Criterion response time is too slow which overrides the convenience of the pop-up library.

Supplement Criterion feedback

Criterion errs on the side of accuracy by disregarding numerous errors. In fact, Burstein, Chodorow and Leacock (2003) reported on a trial in which Criterion's writing analysis tools identified only 40% of subject-verb agreement errors (see also Otoshi, 2005). Consequently it is important not to rely solely on Criterion's reporting of errors.

Conference with students

As Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) note, "the computer writing lab can be an ideal setting for one-to-one teacher-student interaction" (p. 206). Computer lab sessions provide a chance for teachers to follow up on comments and notes and offer assistance while students continue working on their drafts.

Using corpus linguistic techniques with Criterion

This section will describe how corpus linguistic techniques are being used in conjunction with Criterion in the EAP Writing course.

Setting up a learner writing corpus

Since essays written using Criterion are already in electronic form, it is a fairly straightforward matter to set up a learner writing corpus. Using the *Batch Print Reports* function, student essays can be copied and pasted into *.txt* files, which can then be analysed using concordance software such as Wordsmith Tools. Using this procedure we have set up a corpus of essays which runs to more than 300,000 words and which covers five different TOEFL® topics. The student writing was not edited prior to inclusion in the corpus.

Using the learner writing corpus for error analysis

As well as providing a useful source of model essays with which to address essay structure and rhetorical features, this corpus is another tool for giving feedback on sentence-level errors.

The use of learner writing corpora to identify recurring errors has long been advocated by researchers such as Johns (1986), Tribble and Jones (1990), and Biber, Conrad and Reppen (1998, pp. 197-200) who include a case study in which error patterns in essays written by non-native speakers are investigated using corpus-based techniques.

The learner writing corpus can be used to raise learner awareness of errors that Criterion has already identified, such as sentence initial usage of the connectives *and* and *so*. Lin (1999) reports positive results when students compare the frequency of these errors in their own writing with examples found in native speaker corpora. In addition the corpus can be used to highlight errors that Criterion finds problematic. A common example of this kind of error is word-type confusion: students, for example, may confuse the words “convenient” and “convenience”, using the former as a noun and the latter as an adjective. Work to create a set of corpus-based materials that focus on these kinds of recurring errors is ongoing.

Results and Discussion

Overall the EAP students’ writing ability improved significantly during the course. In a timed writing activity at the beginning of the course 18 percent of students received a score of five or six from Criterion while 65 percent of students scored five or six in a similar timed writing activity at the end of the course, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Score frequencies

(Score of)	Pre test		Post test	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
1	1	1%	0	0%
2	5	4%	4	3%
3	50	41%	13	11%
4	43	36%	26	21%
5	15	12%	53	44%
6	7	6%	25	21%

Qualitative data in the form of student feedback and teacher impressions also support the view that Criterion played a role in promoting successful learning outcomes. Both teachers and students were positive about the increase in productivity, the role of feedback, and access to error analysis. Student comments written in response to a prompt asking them to evaluate the software and the course suggest that both Criterion feedback and guidance from instructors were important. A typical comment follows:

[By using Criterion] I can find my mistakes easily and correct it quickly. In addition, comments from our teacher were also helpful for me. Criterion is automatic advice but teacher’s comments offered us different information from Criterion. So I think both are important for me.

Finally, while we tend to see Criterion as motivating to our students, one caveat is that the students who participated in this course were all English majors who, one could argue, already have a high degree of motivation. Additional classroom research in other teaching contexts would be the best way to investigate whether online writing software such as Criterion can motivate student writers.

Biodata

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