

# **Anchor Points for Teaching ESL Academic Writing in the Changing Educational Landscape**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, there has been a tremendous paradigm shift towards seeing language as a dynamic and multifaceted process, which has opened new avenues and posed new challenges for both teaching and learning. Given that the CEFR supplies the conceptual vision of our research, we singled out three principles permeating the 2020 edition of the volume (student-centered approach, action-oriented approach, social agency, and mediation) and took them as the anchor points when designing the syllabus of our course for B1–B2 learners. The main objective of the study is to understand how the CEFR and the teaching assets it contains can be incorporated into the classroom. The authors argue that catering to students' needs by constructing an individual roadmap, modeling real-life situations, and learning through interaction with peers empowers students to get in the driving seat of the learning process, exert their social agency, and, consequently, get closer to their goals and aspirations.

**Keywords:** L2 academic writing, science communication, CEFR, literature circles, student-centered approach, action-oriented approach.

## **1. Introduction**

Language learning has always been a fascinating and enigmatic feat — one where the questions far outweigh the answers. Over the ages, researchers, like Artur's knights, have embarked on a quest in an attempt to fathom the mysteries of languages

and ultimately find the most efficient methods of learning them. Drawing on a long and rich history of searching for the Grail, teachers are trying to mold methods and techniques to meet new challenges and answer tricky questions. For instance, we find ourselves brooding over the components of the non-exhaustive list of skills and assets we are to equip our students with. We cannot help debating whether or not ChatGPT will shake the educational system to the core and save us the trouble of teaching writing. Following in our ancestors' footsteps, we keep looking for a framework that will give us a clear roadmap for helping our students achieve language fluency and accomplish their goals.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the publication of the European Council's project has constituted a watershed moment in the history of ELT. The CEFR brings into sharper focus a new vision that steers educators away from seeing language as a conveyor of a fixed code to recognizing its role as a unique vehicle for communication, opportunity, and success in social, educational, and professional domains [Piccardo 2022: 1; CEFR 2020: 27]. Having sparked an educational reform and initiated a paradigm shift in both how languages are learned and what role learners play in the process, the CEFR is now considered a toolbox full of strategies, practices, and signposts to use when paving the way for teaching and honing learners' skills.

The overall objective of our study is to get a handle on how educators can use the CEFR and its overarching tenets to help learners enhance their science communication and academic writing skills and to encourage them to share research findings by using their unique and distinct voices.

## **2. Course Design**

Given that the CEFR supplies the conceptual vision of our research, we singled out three principles permeating the

2020 edition of the volume and took them as the anchor point when designing the syllabus of our course for B1–B2 learners. In the article, we will bring them all into the limelight and demonstrate how they can be incorporated into the classroom.

### **2.1. Student-centered approach**

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a student-centered approach has been dominating the field of teaching and learning. It empowers learners to take a step from being passive receivers of information that is neither relevant nor significant to them to paving their own educational path and forming a force to be reckoned with [Tang 2023: 73]. The CEFR volume, recognizing students as social agents and turning the conventional yet rudimentary hierarchy upside down, shines a spotlight on different ways to implement the student-centered approach to practice.

When elaborating on the syllabus of the course, what should educators use as a point of departure? What principles and tenets should lie at the core of the course? Adamant proponents of a teacher-centered approach might reply that the unidirectional flow of information from the teacher preaching in the class to students hanging on every teacher's word is the cornerstone around which the syllabus is to be constructed [Tang 2023: 73]. The educators standing on the grounds of a student-centered approach would beg to differ and get on with asking students about their goals. To cater to students' needs, educators might employ one of the assets woven into the CEFR volume and aimed at developing individual students' profiles [CEFR 2020: 38].

To construct an individual roadmap, the educators should reflect on the following questions: (1) What language activities are relevant for a particular group of learners? (2) What level do the learners need to achieve their goals? [CEFR 2020: 38]. Interviewing students at the outset of the course and asking them to

evaluate the significance of different aspects of language competence give both the teacher and the learner a sense of direction and a roadmap for achieving the goals.

## **2.2. Action-oriented approach**

Ours is the age of information that flows around us and amid our fingers like dry sand. From the socio-constructivist perspective, given the circumstances, teachers should take on the role of facilitators, helping students incorporate new information into the repository of what they already know and ultimately build in new layers to the castle of knowledge. The action-oriented approach, one of the pillars of the CEFR system, is rooted in a constructivist paradigm [CEFR 2022: 31]. Thus, to get a handle on what action-oriented learning is and what activities it implies, we need to consider the nature of learning in light of constructivist theory.

Applying a constructivist lens to knowledge shifts the focus from lecturers possessing and transmitting information to learners collaborating and planting the seeds of knowledge together [Kuok Ho Daniel Tang 2023: 73]. In a similar vein, language is deemed a multifaceted and complex activity that comprises two inextricably interwoven dimensions, i.e., the cognitive existing within the social [CEFR 2022: 30]. Based on this premise, researchers have moved from viewing language as a static and fixed entity to recognizing it as a dynamic and never-ending process of generating knowledge, constructing new meaning, and building social bonds. To capture the dynamic nature of languages, researchers have coined the term ‘languaging’ [Piccardo 2022: 3]. Thus, to empower students to venture beyond the zone of actual development (Vygotsky) and help them sharpen their ESL science communication skills, there is a toolbox of strategies to implement into teaching practice: modeling real-life situations, learn-

ing through interaction with peers [Bazanova 2023: 119], and collaborative tasks culminating in the production of an artifact or performance [CEFR 2020: 31].

Following Vygotsky's premise of the social nature of learning, we decided to make goal-oriented collaboration on a scientific project part and parcel of our course, and to that end, we divided all the participants into teams of two to three. Our contention is that delving deeper into a topic and constructing new knowledge through collaboration and dialogue give students a mission to fulfill with gusto and a clear aim in sight [Piccardo 2022: 7]. Moreover, it empowers students to get in the driving seat of the learning process, navigate it, and exert their agency.

### **2.3. Social agency and mediation**

After spending some time at a desk trying to capture thoughts and dress them up into words, working on a scientific project can turn out to be as feasible and enjoyable as building a skyscraper from scratch. As the proponents of 'scaffolding' argue, that is when the mediator, i.e., the more skilled language user, comes into play and provides novice learners with guidance and support [Applebee, Langer 1983; Wood 1976]. With our course tailored primarily for university students, not only the teacher but also the participants took on the role of mediators and exerted their agency in the social space. In the article, we will shed light on the two building blocks aimed at equipping students with tools and assets to construct their competencies on a solid foundation.

#### *Building Block 1: Literature Circles*

Writing is inseparable from reading. Both writers and scientists draw on the knowledge and expertise accumulated by their ancestors to carry out research and plant seeds for the future. Only by standing on the shoulders of giants can you notice the

missing details of the jigsaw puzzle you are solving and take a look at the topic from a fresh perspective.

As Tyson Seburn, the creator of academic reading circles, points out, “Learners need reading skills broken down into separate functions to recognize and practice” [Seburn 2011]. To help learners build a repertoire of different roles and techniques, researchers and educators use literature circles (LCs) [Shelton Strong 2012; Furr 2004]. First implemented in city schools throughout Chicago, USA, in the 1990s, the idea has been applied to various learning settings, cultivating learner autonomy and engaging students in extensive reading [Shelton-Strong 2012: 214]. Based on the premise that reading competence entails an array of subskills, in LCs, students who are engaged in reading the same material are assigned different roles to fulfill. It is noteworthy that the roles vary and are rotated for each new reading cycle. Table 1 encapsulates the roles we used in our course. The bulk of the roles (discussion leader, summarizer, word wizard, visualizer) stem from researchers` works, with our adding the roles of grammar explorer and dreamer.

By breaking reading competence into a spectrum of practices and subskills and fostering learner autonomy, LCs provide a solid pedagogical foundation on which students take the steering wheel in the learning process and come to view language as a vehicle for interpreting the world, generating knowledge, and building bonds with peers.

### *Building Block 2: Making thoughts visible*

We believe that writing is the process of making thoughts visible. Hence, teaching writing is the process of encouraging students to let their ideas spread wings and take flight into the world. In line with the premise that “written texts are a dialogue between a writer and an imagined reader” [Zou, Hyland 2020:

*Table 1*

### Reading circles roles

Role	Responsibilities
<b>Discussion leader</b>	The discussion leader is responsible for acting as a facilitator in the group and keeping the discussion flowing.
<b>Summarizer</b>	The main task of the summarizer is to recap the key points of the material the group is reading.
<b>Visualizer</b>	The visualizer has to summarize the key ideas of the article in a mind map or create pictures that will convey the core points of the text.
<b>Question maker</b>	The question master is in charge of making 3–5 questions to spark a thought-provoking and meaningful discussion.
<b>Word wizard</b>	The word wizard is responsible for singling out a lexical item from the text and getting ready to introduce them to other students.
<b>Grammar explorer</b>	The grammar explorer has to delve deeper into the grammar rules used in the text and get ready to explain them to their peers.
<b>Dreamer</b>	The dreamer has to try to put themselves in the shoes of different characters and consider the topic from a different angle.

268], we incorporated different forms of propelling students to venture beyond the protective bubble and share the results of their work with others. In the article, we will dig deeper into two of them.

All buildings have a construction plan before they are built. It offers builders a glimpse of what their product will look like and what steps they are to take to achieve it. With scaffolding and an action-oriented approach lying at the roots of our course, we

introduced the conference as the culminating and ultimate goal of our project. Through the course, the participants had a mission to fulfill and worked towards it, building the castle of their thoughts word by word, sentence by sentence, idea by idea. We assume that outlining the final task and signposting the road towards it are beneficial from two perspectives. Not only does it provide students with a clear goal to strive for and a potential reader to write for, but it also shifts the focus from language as a fixed code to learn to language as a means of achieving their ends.

As universities try to shake off their ivory tower image and take their work to diverse audiences beyond their disciplinary comfort zone, blogging and other forms of innovative dissemination channels have entered the picture of academic writing and teaching. Consequently, at the foundation of our course lies not only the conference as the ultimate signpost to walk to, but also various forms of blogging and a wide range of readers to share research findings with. Together, we believe these two perspectives, writing for teachers and writing for peers, offer a fuller picture of what science communication in the digital age is.

### **3. Conclusion**

We believe that the precept in the epigraph of the article encapsulates the nature of teaching. Instead of giving students information on a silver platter, educators have to encourage them to search, process, work with materials, convert them into knowledge, and collaborate with each other. Thus, in our course on science communication and academic writing carried out with a group of B1-B2 learners, we created an action-oriented scenario to give students impetus and a clear roadmap for reaching the ultimate goal. We will further develop our project, trying to embolden more students to take care of their ideas, nurture them, and ultimately watch them spread wings and take flight from



notebooks into the world. Their plumage is too colorful and eye-catching to stifle in the iron cage of self-censorship and doubt.

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