Responding to COVID-19:
Teaching of EAP to Non-Native Postgraduates of Performing Arts

Eric Ho
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

Sammy S. M. Ming
The Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research writing in second language has been a challenge for performing arts postgraduates. They need greater support from the EAP teacher in order to master the required writing skills for their research writing. However, the input from the EAP teacher was limited during the pandemic. Students may not know how to improve their artwork because they found it difficult to share their practices with their classmates. Consequently, it was deemed important to help performing arts postgraduates find peers with similar expertise regardless of online teaching. In this sense, peer review seemed a promising alternative. Peers could help each other to make their artwork productions better, whereas the teacher could assist them to textualise their productions in the research writing. The context of postgraduate performing arts curriculum in relation to L2 research writing has been underexplored, especially in the context of the pandemic. This chapter aims to add to the literature by analyzing the integration of peer review into the postgraduate performing arts curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

For students wishing to pursue a career in the studio arts, universities across Europe

and North America have well established Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programmes (Apps & Mamchur, 2009). In Hong Kong however, MFA is a fairly recent offering within the higher degree landscape and has brought some problematic issues to light. The MFA curriculum is unique in that it requires students to produce a written thesis as well as original artwork productions, for example, choreography in dancing or composition in music. For students accustomed to the studio-based performing arts industry, scholarly research might be quite a foreign concept. Indeed, in a university adopting English as the medium of instruction (EMI), English as a second language (ESL) students have encountered difficulties and demonstrated poor performances in research writing (Micciche, 2014). Generating creative productions and then writing an academic thesis, in a second language (L2), poses a major challenge to ESL students (Hyland et al., 2022).

On an institutional level, there is generally insufficient support for performing arts students transitioning to a research-based curriculum, but this was further exacerbated when the university was forced to adopt emergency remote teaching (ERT) during the pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020). Certainly, performing arts students appreciate face-to-face learning (Biggs & Karlsson, 2011) because of the role that collaboration and oral discussion with peers play in studio practices. However, with the suspension of face-to-face learning this collaboration and discussion was seriously reduced, leaving students significantly disadvantaged in their artwork productions and thesis writing.

Existing research shows that there are two major reasons to explain this deficiency in writing skills for ESL performing arts students. First, the demonstration or use of research writing within a performing arts classroom is likely to be a highly unusual practice, resulting in a general lack of writing literacy awareness among the students (Kill, 2006). Second, the very concept of textualising a visual performance would be considered as unnecessary to these students (Collinson, 2005). Attempting to express studio-based activities textually stands in opposition to the creative self and could even be disruptive to a performance (Kill, 2006; Hockey, 2007). MFA students have, understandably, underestimated the importance of L2 writing when describing or discussing the process within the academic context. This "translative gap" between academic research and artistic skills in the MFA curriculum needs to be addressed (Kill, 2006, p.309). During the pandemic, it is of even greater importance for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers to enhance the oral component of the MFA curriculum. They must assist students to produce a critical analysis in research writing which is necessary for the broader academic context of performing arts.

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