

Have you TILTed? Promote Student Success by TILTed Assignments

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Abstract

Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) has been found to result in student success through avenues such as academic confidence, sense of belonging, and motivation. This article discusses the application of TILTed writing assignments in a multilingual, college English composition course designated for English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The author shares the steps involved in transforming existing assignments into transparent TILTed assignments and discusses how TILTed assignments in the classrooms have the potential to promote student engagement and help EAP students succeed in college classrooms.

Keywords

TILT, transparency in learning and teaching, student success, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), writing assignments

Introduction

The deficit in literacy in the United States is dire; according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), 20% of adults are having problems in English reading comprehension and writing. Multilingual students face even greater literacy challenges because of restricted linguistic input and cultural knowledge. I am fortunate to teach at one of the most diverse colleges in the Southern United States. Many of my students were not born in the U.S., and English is their second or additional language. As a result, many students face many reading and writing challenges. The problem is further exacerbated by the limitations on the number of learning support courses available for students. Currently, the college has merely a single learning support course. Thus, it is very challenging to close the gap in English within the span of just one semester with only one learning support course. To find new ways to improve student success in freshman courses, the composition committee searched for high impact teaching practices (Finley & McNair, 2013) and decided to adopt TILT, which stands for Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) to promote student success (Winkelmes et al., 2016; also see below for details).

TILT emphasizes teachers making conscious efforts to ensure learners understand how and why they are completing the target assignment. The initiative for this model was started by the Association of American Colleges & Universities in 2014 and has since gained popularity in various institutions (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2011; Gianoutsos & Winkelmes, 2016). The TILT framework has gained traction due to books including *Small Teaching* (Lang, 2016), *How College Works* (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014), and *Transparent design in higher education teaching and leadership* (Felten & Finley, 2019). As a member on the composition committee and a participant of the TILT practice, the author shares the steps and discusses potential benefits of the TILTING teaching technique in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course, a learning support course for first-year composition.

Purpose of this Study

This paper aims to introduce TILTING, a teaching technique to promote student success, to interested teachers. The paper intends to provide guidance to create TILTED assignments by discussing one exemplar writing assignment in an EAP writing course in higher education. After providing a brief explanation of the framework, the paper offers a short review of the research showing the positive benefits of the technique. The paper then describes the teaching context, and illustrates the three steps, i.e., *purpose*, *task* and *criteria*, for implementing a TILTED assignment by comparing a non-TILTED assignment and a revised TILTED assignment. Finally, the paper offers the observed benefits of TILTING for student success and discusses its possible impact for classroom teachers.

The TILT Framework

The TILT framework is the result of the Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education project, which started in 2009 and led by Mary-Ann Winkelmes. The framework stresses the importance of making teaching and learning transparent, i.e., making learning processes explicit and accessible (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Communicating how and why students learn course content leads to transparency in teaching and learning. To design TILTED assignments, teachers need to include three key elements: *purpose*, *task*, *criteria* for success. *Purpose* includes information why students are completing the assignments and what knowledge or skills they will gain and how they will apply the knowledge or skills in real life. *Task* informs students the specific steps needed to complete the assignment and pitfalls to avoid. *Criteria* tells students what successful assignments may look like and how their work will be evaluated. *Criteria* could include checklists, rubrics and samples with comments.

Impact of TILTED Assignments in the Classroom

The teaching method has been found to enhance students' academic confidence, sense of belonging, and awareness of skills valued by future employers (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Winkelmes et al., 2016). About 1800 students and 35 faculty participated in the Winkelmes et al.'s study, and 89% of the student participants were students from non-white backgrounds. Faculty only made two assignments transparent and students became more confident academically, felt more affiliated with the school, and learned more job skills.

Gianoutsos and Winkelmes (2016) found that TILTING increased students' retention rates, especially those of underserved students. Their study showed that one year later, students who were in primarily transparent courses continued as registered students at a rate of 15.5% higher than the rest of their counterparts. In addition, studies found that the sense of belonging and confidence that students gained from transparent classes positively correlated with greater persistence and better academic performance (Aronson et al., 2002; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Moreover, a recent study by Howard et al. (2020) showed that transparent assignments reduced the negative impact of online learning for non-white students.

Creating TILTED assignments may also promote student engagement and success in a COVID-19 environment where many students struggle to focus in a hybrid or online teaching mode. During remote teaching, many students may have difficulties communicating frequently with the instructor due to barriers such as internet connectivity, sickness, and lack of access to childcare. Fortunately, creating TILTED assignments does not interrupt normal teaching and does not require extra resources as demonstrated by the following exemplar application.

Description of the Teaching Context

The author went through a TILT training workshop and successfully integrated TILTed assignments into his English for Academic Purposes (EAP) section of a collegiate freshmen composition course. Students in the course were English language learners who were taking developmental writing concurrently with freshman composition. This EAP course aims to provide just-in-time support for students' writing.

TILTed assignments are an ideal, high impact teaching practice which promotes student success and can be applied across curriculums with little interruption of the current classroom teaching; For English language learners, this is especially beneficial because they need more scaffolding than their native English-speaking counterparts (NCES, 2019). When teachers design a task, the level of detail provided in instructions must parallel the degree of language proficiency and more importantly, provide a roadmap to success. Otherwise, the instructions are not appropriate (or even accessible) for the multilingual students.

Steps for Implementing TILTed Writing Assignments

Three key elements including *purpose*, *task*, and *criteria* must be incorporated into any successful TILTed assignment (Winkelmes et al., 2016). According to Winkelmes et al., these three elements are essential to transparency, as well as student understanding, learning, and success. *Purpose* answers the question why students should do the task and motivates students; *task* answers the question what exact the assignment is and helps eliminate any misunderstanding; *criteria* address the question how the assignment is going to be evaluated and provide clear expectations of the product. These elements are incorporated into TILTed lessons as three steps, all of which make the writing assignments transparent to promote student success.

Step One: Articulate the Purpose of the Assignment

During the *purpose* step, the instructor clearly articulates to students the critical writing and reading skills they should learn or practice while completing the assignment, the content knowledge students should gain from assignment completion, and how students might use the skills they have gained later, both inside and outside of the classroom. The instructor may use terms such as understanding, analyzing, evaluating, and others from Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives to communicate the *purpose* of the assignment to students. Thus, after TILTING, the assignment now should have four layers of *purpose*: real world connections, career connections, college performance, and course outcomes. Providing these four layers of *purpose* may engender students to view TILTed assignments more favorably, since the assignments and their associated skills are relevant to their lives (Winkelmes et al., 2016). The students in this course are advanced English learners who are college students; thus the author chose the Bloom's Taxonomy as the objectives as suggested by Winkelmes et al. (2016). However, depending on the proficiency level of students, teachers can adjust the *purpose* of the TILT model. For example, instructors may choose objectives based on the WIDA levels for K–12 English learners (WIDA, 2020). For advanced multilingual college students, instructors may design objectives based on Level 6 of the WIDA scale.

As seen in Table 1 below, my initial non-TILTed writing assignment lacks transparency as to the *purpose* of the assignment. The TILTed assignment is transparent with four layers of the above-mentioned *purpose*.

Table 1

Articulation of Purpose Before and After the Application of the TILT Framework in an Assignment

Assignment Before TILT Purpose Not Transparent	Assignment After TILT Purpose Transparent
<i>Purpose:</i> Not Articulated	<p><i>Purpose:</i> Real World Connections: We make evaluations for various purposes and audiences, sometimes without realizing that we are making judgments. When you make a decision about going to a particular college, choosing a career, or even dating someone, you have evaluated the subjects. The evaluation project will help you make quality judgments.</p> <p>Career Connections: The goal of this project is to evaluate a specific major or career. Using the widely accepted standards of judgment, you will determine if your chosen major or career is a good fit for you or not. The skills you will acquire from completing this assignment will help you make more informed decisions in your career as well. For example, you will learn what standards or criteria are appropriate for your purpose and audience for decision making.</p> <p>College Performance: You will practice the writing literacy that is essential for most of your college courses such as history, arts and others.</p> <p>Course Outcomes: (1) To engage individually and collaboratively in the writing process including: prewriting, writing, editing, assessing, and revising; and (2) To become acquainted with research and documentation techniques.</p>

Step Two: Define the Task

During the *task* step, the instructor holds a class discussion in which he or she names, defines, and outlines the assignment so that students know what they are to do and how to go about accomplishing it (Winkelmes et al., 2019). Specifically, the instructor outlines the procedure for completing the assignment, provides a few recommended steps which will aid students as they complete the assignment, as well as offers suggestions as to how to best overcome various assignment challenges (Winkelmes et al., 2016). The detailed outline of the procedure provides students with a blue-print or scaffold for creating their assignment, boosting students' confidence in their abilities to complete the task, while reducing their anxiety (Winkelmes et al., 2019). During the discussion, the instructor may ask students direct, targeted questions, ones which will help them to make connections between the posed questions and the assignment. Targeted questions, and the guided discussions which follow, should be crafted to foster better understanding of the assignment and help students to relate to it, thus creating transparency (Winkelmes, 2013).

As shown in Table 2, although the original assignment names the task students are to complete and provide them with a general procedure for completing it, the initial, non-TILTed writing assignment lacks the procedural details found in a TILTed assignment and does not offer

them any suggestions or aid as to how to best tackle assignment problems. Furthermore, although students are asked one question related to the assignment, the assignment does not cover the importance of evaluation, how to conduct a reliable evaluation (an important life skill), and how the assignment might be used to help them make better life choices in the future, such as choice of major or career. Therefore, transparency is not accomplished with the initial assignment.

Table 2

Definition of Task Before and After the Application of the TILT Framework in an Assignment

Assignment Before TILT Task Not Transparent	Assignment After TILT Task Transparent
<p>Task: For this assignment, you will write an evaluation paper which will be due in the dropbox on D2L 9:00 AM on Monday, April 30.</p> <p>The task will be to assess your choice of major or career path. Why is the major or career a particularly good one?</p> <p>Once you have determined the primary audience on which to focus your evaluation, you will need to come up with different criteria for evaluating the major or career and then compare and contrast different majors or careers based on the audience and criteria you have chosen.</p> <p>You will need to justify your evaluation by presenting evidence from 3 articles which will come from a bibliography list provided to you by your instructor.</p>	<p>Task: This assignment will focus on evaluation—assessing your choice of major or career path. Why is the major or career you have chosen (or are considering) a particularly good one? Why is it significantly better than other choices? You will continue to develop your critical thinking and analytical abilities as you make an evaluative argument about its comparative nature and provide evidence for how it meets (or does not meet) specific criteria that you determine. We will practice identifying appropriate criteria to evaluate your chosen major or career and will provide specific examples to support those criteria. The final evaluation should be 3-4 pages double-spaced in length excluding the works cited page.</p> <p>Steps First, Choose an Audience To whom will you be directing this evaluation? Your parents? A future employer? A scholarship committee? You need to create some reason for making this kind of evaluation at this particular time, so that you can better tailor your evaluation's focus. Remember that your credibility is vitally important here, as it is in all good arguments, so take care to present yourself as someone who is well-informed about the issue you are discussing. Your credibility will also be influenced by how well you present yourself as the kind of person your audience wants to listen to: a reasonable, thoughtful, and considerate individual.</p> <p>Next, Research and Develop Your Argument To create an evaluative argument, you will work through the following stages:</p>

	<p>Develop a thesis statement that makes a claim about the quality of your major or career path</p> <p>Establish criteria for evaluating the target major/career under discussion,</p> <p>Research information about your major or career, and</p> <p>Present and discuss details to demonstrate how your chosen major or career does or does not fit your criteria.</p>
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Step Three: Make Criteria Clear

During this step, the instructor details his or her expectations of the finished writing product, as well as the *criteria* used for grading. It is recommended to list information such as characteristics of a successful paper, providing real samples of papers of various degree of success to help students distinguish a successful paper from a poor paper, and including a checklist of requirements (formatting, thesis, citations, grammar, page length, etc.) in order to assist students in evaluating their work (Burton, 2006; Winkelmes et al., 2019). Providing a rubric if appropriate for the assignments is also recommended (Pui et al., 2020).

As Table 3 demonstrates, the original assignment is less transparent; the revised assignment is more transparent with a list of expected features of the paper, and it provides a rubric and example papers with comments for students to examine. During the classroom teaching, the students use a rubric and a checklist to evaluate example papers and complete peer reviews. The rubric and the checklist provide students with opportunities to self-check.

Table 3

Criteria Before and After the Application of the TILT Framework in an Assignment

Assignment Before TILT <i>Criteria not transparent</i>	Assignment After TILT <i>Criteria transparent</i>
<p>Your paper should be 3-4 pages double-spaced in length.</p> <p>You will need to justify your evaluation by presenting evidence from the Web sites themselves and evidence from 3 articles which will come from a bibliography list provided to you by your instructor.</p> <p>Your project should show your proficiency with writing mechanics.</p>	<p><i>Criteria:</i> Your evaluation should...</p> <p>Possess a clear, evaluative thesis statement in terms of the defined criteria</p> <p>Show attention to audience values through word choice, selection of details, tone, and organization</p> <p>Identify and define clearly the criteria used to evaluate the text in question</p> <p>Provide specific examples to support each criterion</p> <p>Incorporate at least three secondary sources (cited in MLA format); one of the three must be academic</p> <p>Your entire project should show your proficiency with writing mechanics. This includes the appropriate use of citations, sentence structure, word choice, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.</p> <p>Rubric and checklist: See d21 content week 10—Rubric; Checklist</p>

See d21 content week 10 for example evaluation papers.
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Closing Thoughts

In TILTed assignments, students are provided with a well-articulated *purpose* for completing assignments, and the *task* and *criteria* for completions are made transparent. The targeted question, detailed procedures, and recommendations have provided students with a roadmap to success. As a result of TILTed assignments, many of the students are more motivated to complete assignments because they have found both academic and real-world value in completing their assignments. Many students also had less anxiety and less confusion about the assignment. Since the research on TILT is quite new (Winkelmes et al., 2016; Winkelmes et al., 2019), there is no particular past research targeting the language acquisition in specific areas such as grammar, listening and speaking. However, the TILT technique has the great potential to improve students' language learning based on the past research and the current informal observation. For instance, students in general were found more motivated and felt more confident about learning as shown by several studies (e.g., Winkelmes et al., 2016; Yong, 2017), which will lead to more success in language acquisition. Future research is necessary to confirm the observed benefits for language learners.

For instructors, creating TILTed assignments requires time and efforts. Initially, the transformation may be difficult due to the explicit directions and extra time. However, once it is completed, teachers may find the rewarding is worthwhile since the transparency of the lessons enhances student engagement and success. Teachers can use their existing assignments and transform them into TILTed assignments following the three steps outlined above. The change requires little resources and does not disrupt normal teaching. Teachers can also use this transformation as a chance to examine their teaching objectives and criteria in order to design fully transparent assignments which are better aligned with their course outcomes. Although the population is advanced language learners in a college composition course, the TILT teaching technique can be adapted to other settings. For instance, for K–12 language teachers, to make their assignments more transparent, they could adapt the TILT method by using the WIDA levels as the purpose, provide recommended steps to complete a task and supply grading criteria and example products.

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