

Bridging the Gap: A Systematic Deconstruction Strategy for ESL Student Success in Academic Writing

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Abstract

This paper entitled “Bridging the Gap: A Systematic Deconstruction Strategy for ESL Student Success in Academic Writing” puts forward a strategy for writing prompts, tailored to help English as a Second Language (ESL) for students to navigate the challenges of academic writing. Since academic writing is fundamental in education, ESL learners experience untoward obstacles due to the linguistic and cultural subtleties in the assigned tasks. The technique proposed simplifies abstract instructions into concrete manageable steps by breaking them down into small chunks of understandable pieces. In a straight forward way, it addresses both rhetorical and disciplinary requirements to build confidence among students and accuracy across variegated writing tasks. The paper emphasises on the emerging field of prompt engineering, highlighting its significance in enabling students to use AI tools effectively and efficiently for multiple purposes like learning, research, and the development of critical thinking skills. It brings to light the pivotal role of English Language Teachers (ELTs) in nurturing these abilities by emphasising on clarity, contextual understanding and ongoing refinement. O. Henry's “The Gift of the Magi” is used as a practical example to demonstrate the strategy of enhancing language proficiency and critical thinking, with the aim of preparing ESL students to make them competent for the demands of academic discourse and professional environments in an AI-driven world.

Keywords: *ESL, Academic Writing, Prompt Engineering*

Introduction

Higher education hinges on students' ability to communicate effectively and accurately, and to have the skills to interpret, express and be spontaneous about nuanced instructions, or information. The ESL learner faces constraints related to language and cultural nuances embedded in writing prompts, that define the language of academia. When ESL learners shift from general English training A to discipline based courses, the academic expectations, especially the implicit expectations, of academic work can become untenable and inhibition starts to creep in leading to a sense of imminent and energetic shame. For this reason this paper examines the new field of prompt engineering, importance for working to enable students to leverage AI tools for a variety of educational purposes such as learning, research and the promotion of critical thinking. It highlights the very significant role of English Language Teachers (ELT's) to foster these skills based on clarity, context, and continual improvement. O. Henry's gift of the Magi example is used to show the strategy of extending language use and and critical thinking to

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establish a practice base for ESL learners to be better able to meet their own required academic discourse demands and those required from the profession.

What is Prompt Engineering?

Prompt Engineering is the ability to communicate with an AI clearly and in an effective manner to receive meaningful results. It involves skillfully formulating inputs ie prompts to steer AI models, especially large language models (LLMs) such as Chat GPT, Gemini etc, to yield desired outputs. It's about communicating as clearly as possible with an AI to obtain the best response possible. Think of it as learning to "talk AI." Rather than just typing a question you can ask the AI, prompt engineering will be the careful construction of our request by:

- Giving clear instructions: What do you want the AI to do exactly?
- Contextualizing: What context/background information does the AI need to know to understand your query?
- Setting a specification on the format: Do you need a list, a paragraph, an essay, a code snippet?
- Specifying tone and style: Do you want the response to be formal, informal, creative, or analytical?
- Giving examples (few-shot prompting): Showing the AI what you want at times will assist it to understand what you're asking.
- Decomposing complex tasks: If you have a task that is complicated, the AI usually will provide a better result if you can walk it through in steps.

The Importance of Prompt Deconstruction

Writing prompts do not simply tell a student what to do; they ultimately shape how they approach an assignment. While authentic prompts, including those using the RAFTS (Role, Audience, Format, Topic, and Strong Verb) prompt design model can increase student engagement and critical thinking, they do not even begin to address important gaps in grammar, fluency, or vocabulary. The involvement of the teacher in English Language Teaching (ELT) goes beyond the focus on the mechanics of the language, the goal being the creation of a safe and inter culturally aware learning space. Misunderstandings from distraction in writing prompts, which are far too common in the writing of ESL students, can confuse and derail a student's writing far more than an unclear writing process (Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Mohammad et al., 2024a; Mohammad et al., 2024b; Yaseen et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important for teachers not only to utilize the prompt strategies, but also institute language and writing growth.

Why Students Should Understand Prompt Engineering in the Current Context?

Prompt engineering has emerged as such an important skill for students in today's educational and professional context because of the expanded use of AI tools. Here are some key reasons: 1. The use of AI for learning: In some ways, AI tools can be very powerful learning tools, but only if students are able to utilize the tools properly. Learning to be a prompt engineer allows students to:

- Ask for explanations in their own language: AI can take a hard concept and translate it into more accessible language or give examples that connect to their understanding.
- Create study aids: Using texts or notes, produce outlines, quizzes, flashcards, or summaries.
- Brainstorm and outline ideas: students can generate initial ideas and outlines for essays, research papers, and creative writing.
- Get focused feedback (with caveats): AI feedback can provide ideas about how to improve drafts but should not replace human feedback and instruction.

Enhancing Research & Information Gathering:

- Students summarize long articles/reports via prompt engineering; summarize, and quickly understand the main points of academic texts.
- Distill specific data: AI summarizes long documents and extracts salient information or arguments.
- Provide literature reviews (under appropriate critical supervision): AI can be utilized to compile data on a topic and the students can then evaluate and synthesize it.

Promoting Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking Skills:

The rapid engineering approach itself supports higher-order thinking:

- Clarity of thought-students need to clearly define their needs and questions.
- Problem decomposition- breaking complex tasks into smaller, more manageable suggestions.
- Evaluation and improvement-students will engage in critical evaluation to analyze AI outputs and refine their prompts iteratively.

Career Skills in Fine-Tuning for Future-Proofing:

In almost every sector, effectively communicating with AI is becoming a baseline workplace skill. Understanding how to utilize AI technologies competently can provide you with a significant advantage in the workforce, no matter what industry—marketing, tech, healthcare, or the arts. Students who have prompt engineering training will be better positioned to meet the demands of the modern workforce.

Digital Literacy and Ethical AI use: Learning prompt engineering means understanding the biases and limitations of AI. This allows students to discern potential "hallucinations" or biased outputs, while also realizing digital literacy and the ethical and appropriate use of these powerful devices.

Role of English Language Teacher in Enhancing this Skill among Students

The English Language Teacher's Role in Developing this Capacity with Students English language teachers (ELTs) have a unique opportunity to support students with the development of their prompting skills. ELTs understanding of critical thinking, language, and communication directly relates to the by-products of prompting:

Conciseness, accuracy, and clarity: ELTs traditionally have dealt with these topics in writing. They can teach students: - to use specific terminology: providing definitions for terms instead of ambiguous language. - to create clear sentences: making sure AI understands what it is being asked. -to avoid repetition: get to the point quickly to eliminate confusing the AI.

Teaching Contextual and Audience Awareness:

ELTs can guide students to consider the "audience" (the AI), and the relevant "context" to provide the AI with the best possible answers, just as they guide students to consider in adapting their writing for a human audience. This entail:

- Providing relevant background information: Identifying what information the AI needs.
- Role definition: Providing the AI with instructions to act as a "friendly tutor," "scientific expert," or "literary critic."

Teaching Questioning and Instruction-Following:

ELTs already instruct students in understanding and responding to complex instructions with reading and writing assessments. They can extend this to:

- Analyzing prompt parts: Breaking down the elements of the AI prompts to identify key prompts.
- Designing effective questions: Teaching different types of questions (e.g., open ended, closed, clarifying).
- Deconstructing complex tasks: Setting up students to take a large problem and break it down into smaller actionable steps for the AI.

Supporting Iterative Writing and Revisions:

The iterative prompt engineering process reflects a writing process. E-Learning Teachers can incorporate this process by:

- Promoting experimentation: Students use different prompts to generate different outputs.
- Promoting critical analysis of the AI output: Teaching students to assess the AI response for accuracy, relevance, and completeness.
- Assisting with refinements: When prompts have generated outputs, the students can revise their prompts based on the performance of the AI, similar to when they revise a written draft.

Using AI Tools Responsibly and Ethically:

E-Learning Teachers can facilitate discussions such as:

- Integrity of the academic work: How to utilize AI as a tool to assist with learning instead of plagiarizing.
- Bias in AI: Understanding that AI models will replicate their training data biases.
- Validating sources: The students will still need to validate the information generated by the AI.

Incorporating prompt engineering into their syllabus, ELTs can help students become effective communicators not only with humans but also with the growing availability of AI tools that will be a part of their academic and working lives.

Literature Review

Many studies have reported the obstacles students learning English as a second or additional language must navigate when employing academic writing prompts. Canseco and Byrd (1989) highlight that misunderstanding an unclear prompt, particularly outside an ESL classroom, can halt writing progress and arguing for clearly articulated directions. Spack (1984), Reid (1993), and Hujran et al. (2023) affirm that students must be familiar with the academic word choice and construct of many writing prompts (i.e., "analyze," "compare," "argue") because using references that have built upon those terms when attempting to make sense of represents prompt comprehension. Additionally, Pfinstag and O'Hara (1998) note that ESL students will often concentrate on what is presented in the first couple of sentences, and we miss opportunities for comprehension and need different document reading strategies. Spack (1984) emphasized the contribution of pre-writing as a way to connect prompt comprehension and the ability to write above a level of coherence through brainstorming and clustering exercises. Leki (1995) cautions need to have identified "gaps" in understanding, through independent research, when relying on clues provided by research paper sormodels as examples of writing, rather than expected responses with unacceptable assumptions. Finally, as Tomas (2012) does in her guided email workshops, the practice of asking questions is presented as a condition of student independence for clarification.

Methodology

This research study has utilized both qualitative and quantitative research methodology to determine the students' ability using the SDS. There were two phases to the study. The researchers used a post-intervention questionnaire to quantitatively obtain the students' perceptions and to show what changed, and qualitatively obtain an open-ended response to explain why and how. There searchers also used analyzing the student's writing samples. Participants: 60 undergraduate ESL students were divided into groups(experimental and control).Intervention: The SDS was a structured approach developed to improve student writing skills throughworkshopsthatwere8 weeks long and 90 minute workshops for the experimental group. The intervention incorporated, prompt dissection, the chunking and scaffolding method of writing, rhetorical and disciplinary alignment and application through studying "The Gift of the Magi" in which students must analyze, identify, and assess the text.

Data Collection: Post-intervention Questionnaire:

After the eight week intervention phase was completed, a test was administered to all students to investigate their

1. understanding level of the academic writing prompts
2. proficiency in completing academic writing tasks.
3. Impact and use of the strategies employed on the experimental group
4. Level of skill they would have in adapting to the use of AI tools for academic writing and their use of prompt-engineering training.
5. impact of "The Gift of the Magi," as a pedagogical device.

Strategies Adopted to Deconstruct Prompts to Improve Academic Writing

Strategies copied from Brizee (2011) and adopted in accordance with best practices in ESL pedagogy, the following seven-steps checklist of strategies allows students to deconstruct any writing

task in a systematic way. When applied to a text like "The Gift of the Magi," using the deconstruction strategies provides students with a clearer basis for analysis and response.

Adapted from Brizee (2011) and in line with ESL best practice, the following checklist of strategy steps provides a systematic approach for students to complete any writing assignment. The checklist, when used on a text like "The Gift of the Magi," provides a tangible model for analytical open-response and ultimately responses.

Read the Entire Prompt Thoroughly

ESL students tend to latch onto the first sentence of a prompt and fail to see significant details (Pfinstag & O'Hara, 1998; Mohammad et al., 2024c; Mohammad et al., 2024d). We will have to take ESL students through the entire prompt related to "The Gift of the Magi" to read and identify words they are unfamiliar with or details related to logistics (e.g., length, due date, form). In the prompt asking students to analyze the theme of the story "The Gift of the Magi", there is a significant distinction between a prompt that required an argumentative essay –compared to summary.

Underline Significant Details and Circling Words

The Researchers will have students underline the tasks required, showing category specifics by circling discipline-related terms, or pointing out words they are not certain about. Analyzing "The Gift of the Magi" may again lean large on terms: irony, theme of sacrifice-in-the-name-of-love, character motivation, and symbolism. In this instance, students must believe they understand academic usages of terms and use of discourse strategies like analyze, compare, or argue - significant stage in comprehension (Spack, 1984; Reid, 1993; Mohammad et al., 2024e; Mohammad et al., 2024f; Soria-Barreto et al., 2021).

Ranking Ideas by Importance

Prompts will frequently ask multiple questions or cover several topics. Students will need to rank these individually by importance, and then begin to outline their response (Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Mohammad et al., 2024g; Mohammad et al., 2024h). With "The Gift of the Magi," if the prompt asks for a discussion on the theme of sacrifice and the story's ending, the students would need to rank how they want to discuss these as the main idea of their argument, and then sketch out their plan.

Consider How to Address the Prompt

Pre-writing strategies like brainstorming, clustering, or looping (Spack, 1984) can be used to create ideas and refine focus. Prior to writing about "The Gift of the Magi," students could brainstorm ideas about Della and Jim's motives, the significance of the gifts, or the moral meaning of the story. This is another way to signal to students how they bridge the gap between conceptualizing the prompt and organizing the writing into a cohesive paper.

Specify What Research Needs to Be Done

Students will identify some knowledge gaps before completing background research. This could be finding definitions of words (e.g., "epiphany" in a literary sense), or identifying critical interpretations of "The Gift of the Magi" (Leki 1995; Shlash Mohammad et al., 2024a). It might include understanding the historical context, or O. Henry's style.

Examine Models

To alleviate anxiety regarding format or tone, students should be encouraged to ask for examples of published papers or essays analyzing similar short stories. It is important, however, for the students to see models as reference for their assignment only, not templates (Leki 1995). It can be beneficial to observe or review how other writers organize a paper or argument or incorporate examples of literary texts (McCarty 2012; Mohammad et al., 2024b; Riazian et al., 2025; Suprpto, 2022; Adıgüze et al., 2025; Adeiza et al., 2023).

Ask Questions

Finally, if students still have questions, they will be encouraged to reach out to instructors or classmates for clarifications (Leki 1995). Teaching students how to ask questions - even in the form of guided email workshops (Tomas 2012) - helps develop ownership of their learning. In the case of TGA, they might seek clarity regarding level of depth required for each piece of literary analysis or amount of external research.

Example Application: The Gift of the Magi Essay Assignment Example Prompt:

"Write an analytical essay examining how O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* represents the theme of sacrifice and love. Your essay should incorporate textual evidence and examine the historical and cultural context."

How an ESL Student Could Use the Strategy:

Read the entire prompt: Recognize that the essay must include an analysis about how the story conveys the theme of sacrifice and love and not only a summary of the plot.

Highlight the important information: Essay type: Analytical - Theme: Sacrifice and love - Requirements: Use textual evidence; consider historical/cultural context - Unknown terms: "analytical," "textual evidence," "historical context"...research definitions.

Organize Ideas:

- Primary: Sacrifice and love (the central argument)
- Supporting: Historical and cultural context (the secondary level)

Consider How to Approach the Prompt:

- Brainstorm: List of sacrifice moments in the story (Della selling hair; Jim selling watch)
- Cluster the ideas: How these acts represent love
- Think about the cultural values of the era concerning gift giving and selflessness.

Identify Research Needs:

- Search early 20th-century American culture
- Find literary analysis articles about O. Henry's irony and theme.

Examine Examples:

Ask for a sample literary analysis essay to consider how analysis might be structured.

Ask Questions:

If you are still unsure about the "historical context" aspect, find out whether, or what, your professor wants.

Data Analyses

The thematic analyses of the open-ended remarks of the experimental group participants revealed three dominant themes:

- (1) Increased Prompt Clarity and Directional Cues,
- (2) Purposeful and Critical Integration of the AI Tool
- (3) Reduction of anxiety for academic writing.

Theme 1: Increased Prompt Clarity and Directional Cues

Many students reported a significant change in their ability to comprehend academic writing prompts in general, and to analyze their purpose and meaning after learning the deconstructive strategy. Prior to the intervention, prompts had often frustrated them because they seemed abstract or daunting; post-intervention, students described prompts as actionable tasks. This theme affirms how the deconstructed nature of prompts offered students a blueprint for the writing tasks.

Illustrative Quote of Student

"I had an essay about a short story. The prompt was to 'Discuss the protagonist's journey'. I broke it into: 'Who is the protagonist?', 'What is their goal?', 'What obstacles?', 'How do they change?', it made my outline that much stronger." (Student 2, Experimental Group)

Analysis:

Their responses showed that the method directly addressed a central challenge for ESL students: prompting misinterpretation. The "checklist" way of thinking with steps including highlighting keywords, and ranking ideas allowed students to shift from passive reading to engaged deconstruction. This direct clarity was transformed directly into their outlining and argument development, making academic writing more focused and relevant. They consistently reported identifying rhetorical (e.g. "analyze," "argue") and disciplinary (e.g. "theme," "character motivation") requirements as a valuable gain

Theme 2: Strategic & Critical AI Tool

Use Students in the experimental group did not describe using AI tools as a method of content creation, but as a strategic adjunct for some part of the writing process, particularly working with their specific prompt deconstruction strategies. The training on prompt engineering seemed to be particularly relevant for this critical use.

Illustrative Quote of Student

"If I just typed 'write about Gift of Magi,' AI gives a generic summary. But when I used the SDS to clarify my specific analytical task and then prompted the AI, I got much more useful insights." (Student C, Experimental Group)

Analysis:

This theme show cases an effective integration of prompt engineering as part of the academic workflow. Students did not report using AI for generative original content but rather for higher-order support such as brainstorming, outlining, and refining a particularly linguistic aspect of the task. Instead of using AI for an uncritical or less critical use, such as just to 'generate content', students' ability to craft intentional and contextualized prompts (as a direct product of deconstruction) is the catalyst that distinguishes their prompt engagement with AI from other possible uncritical studies we have reviewed. Students' comments reflect that the strategy provided the structure to make AI to an effective learning and research tool.

Theme 3: Lowered Anxiety Towards Academic Writing

One of the strongest emotional benefits described by students was a decrease in anxiety towards academic writing. The systematic ways in which students were able to take a more controlled and predictable approach to complex academic tasks (the same tasks that often elicit the most anxiety in ESL writers) was not able in their narratives.

Illustrative Quote of Student

"The 'chunking' part, literally not 'scary' when I had smaller goals, instead of writing an entire essay. When we 'worked' on 'The Gift of the Magi', using the information presented we broke down the analysis, identifying themes, character motivations, and then symbols, was more manageable than writing a concept or entire essay." (Student 2, Experimental Group)

Analysis:

The qualitative data suggests collectively that the systematic nature of deconstruction likely served as an anxiety buffer. When complicated academic tasks can be broken down into manageable and discrete steps, and provide students with a clear way to approach the anxiety inducing task, it at the very least influences a sense of self-efficacy and self-control in student. When emotional effects are perceived and inhibited by the academic writing task, which is especially important for ESL learner with respect to anxiety, cognitive resources associated with anxiety can be used for language production and critical thought, improving learning and performance overall.

Findings

The qualitative data from the open-ended questions in the post-intervention questionnaire provided rich perspectives on what it was like for students to use the Transferable Strategy for Deconstructing Prompts. In the analysis, three themes developed, reflecting on the strategy's influence on students' understanding of the prompts, engagement with AI tools, and student anxiety. The findings deepen and add to the quantitative findings by illustrating how the intervention influenced the academic writing processes of the ESL students.

Enhanced Prompt Clarity and Directedness

Students reported a significant change in their ability to understand and interpret academic writing prompts after participating in the deconstruction strategy. The prompts students received, pre-intervention, often felt abstract or overwhelming, leading to confusion and misinterpretation of the prompt. According to students, the prompts after the training were a 'to-do' guide, leading to a clear sense of their writing process.

For example, Student 1 mentioned, "Before when I would see a prompt, it felt 'like a wall.' But with the strategy, and breaking it down into small little parts, I could see the bricks. It was much clearer. I underline verbs and audience and it became a checklist. So clear." In a similar way, Student 2 showed this shift with an example, "I had an essay about a short story and the prompt was 'Discuss the protagonist's journey.' I broke it out into: 'Who is the protagonist?', 'What is their goal?', 'What obstacles?', 'How do they change?' And it made my outline a lot better." Another student, Student D said it strategically helped, "To be clear about the rhetorical purpose – like am I analyzing or arguing? – changed how I approached the essay. I had a sense of what the prof really wanted." This theme emphasizes how the strategy addressed one of the specific ESL challenges in taking the student from passive reading to active deconstruction. Their systematic steps, including highlighting key words and understanding rhetorical and disciplinary requirements, created a checklist mentality that empowered students. This clarity was useful in developing their outlines and arguments and their academic writing became more relevant and focused.

Through qualitative data we found the students in the experimental group engaged in the AI tools not as a tool that produces content, but as a strategy for discrete moments of the writing process, especially when combined with their skills and knowledge of deconstructing the prompt. The specific training on prompt engineering was critical to enabling this critical understanding of AI.

Student C made an important distinction saying, "If I just typed 'write about Gift of Magi', the AI gave a generic summary. But after using the SDS to delineate my particular analytical task, and then engineer the prompt, I received much more helpful information." Likewise,

Student 1 said, "I used Gemini to brainstorm different angles for an argumentative essay on climate change. I prompted it: " Give me 5 completely unique, debatable arguments for an argumentative essay on climate change while considering economic and social issues, avoiding common points." It gave me great ideas that I had not even considered." In another case,

Student 2 used Chat GPT "to check if my thesis statement was clear. I wrote my thesis and asked, 'Is this thesis clear and debatable? How can I improve it?' It gave me good suggestions around wording."

This theme provides a case of a constructive adoption of prompt engineering in the academic workflow. The student responses indicated they mostly used AI to help them with higher order thinking tasks such as brainstorming and outlining, and editing specific language features, and not for straight content generation. The capacity to ask focused and contexted prompts, which is the consequence of the deconstruction training, seemed to be the distinguishing aspect of their potentially more profound and constructive AI use.

Reduction in Academic Writing Anxiety

The most significant emotional benefit noted by students was a large reduction in anxiety related to academic writing tasks. The structured, predictable in herent in the deconstruction strategy gave a sense of control usually not had by ESL students who have added complexity to academic learning. "the 'chunking' part. It made a big assignment less scary, because I had smaller goals, "**Student 2** had a very clear sense of relief. For Student 1, "the step by step approach of the strategy made me less anxious about

academic writing." Student F confirmed this statement by saying, "I used to feel so overwhelmed when I got an essay prompt. Now I know the first thing to do, then next. Its like I'm given a guide so I'm not so worried".

The qualitative data suggests strongly that the systematic nature of the deconstruction strategy acted as an anxiety filter and also by breaking down the daunting tasks into manageable steps, and providing a clear process, it helped to engage a greater sense of self efficacy and control for the students. This emotional effect is important for ESL students because a reduction in anxiety can free up cognitive resources to devote to language production or critical thinking, which is one aspect of improving educational outcomes.

Conclusion

The prompt deconstruction strategy offered in this paper provides a practical and transferable approach for ESL students to understand the nuances and expectations of writing in an academic context regardless of discipline. By addressing writing prompts in a systematic process that understands each of the steps involved – with readers thoroughly reading and highlighting key terms, pre-writing effectively, researching strategically, using models purposefully, and asking questions– learners can take on the writing process with the tools necessary to understand and approach any prompt and respond appropriately. The application of the seven-step checklist in the context of "The Gift of the Magi" demonstrated the practicality of the strategy, which changes the potentially disheartening task of a literary analysis into an achievable and procedural task. This process not only offers a clear strategy grounded in expectations evolving from the language and academic context of university writing but it also involves the kinds of skills ESL students will need to develop such as thinking critically, problem-solving, and self-advocacy. The strategy ultimately stems from the understanding of how to better understand the expectations of a prompt and empower the students to better take charge of their learning. The strategy connects the meaning and conventions involved with language learning and how to effectively perform university-level writing effectively, by increasing both competence and confidence for ESL writers during their academic journey and beyond.

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