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Teaching academic English: Language and culture in the academic community

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Teaching academic English: Language and culture in the academic community

Abstract

1997 is the first year of the English Language Studies major at the University of Wollongong. The major has arisen out of a clear need to address the language development of non-English speaking background (NESB) students. As the major is being developed and the subject materials taught, we, the developers are conscious of our own teaching practices and are observing the learning styles of our students. As we participate in this process, we are learning much about who we are as educators and what we are trying to do with these students. These students have language development needs but they are also outside of our intellectual tradition. They need induction into the implicit processes and practices of our academic community. This brief paper outlines the background to the establishment of the major and offers for your consideration some of the issues that we are faced with in trying to take an implicit process of learning and make it explicit while at the same time, also developing the students' English language competency.

***Teaching
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Synopsis

1997 is the first year of the English Language Studies major at the University of Wollongong. The major has arisen out of a clear need to address the language development of non-English speaking background (NESB) students. As the major is being developed and the subject materials taught, we, the developers are conscious of our own teaching practices and are observing the learning styles of our students. As we participate in this process, we are learning much about who we are as educators and what we are trying to do with these students. These students have language development needs but they are also outside of our intellectual tradition. They need induction into the implicit processes and practices of our academic community.

This brief paper outlines the background to the establishment of the major and offers for your consideration some of the issues that we are faced with in trying to take an implicit process of learning and make it explicit while at the same time, also developing the students' English language competency.

Background: The review of the Department of Modern Languages

In February 1995 the Department of Modern Languages was reviewed and one of the most significant outcomes was the recommendation that an English Language Studies (ELS) program for international students be established in the Department. As a result, a working party was established. One of the initial tasks of the ELS Working Party was to conduct a comprehensive survey of currently enrolled International students at both undergraduate and graduate level to determine students' perceived needs as a basis for developing an appropriate English Language Studies program.

The survey

In July 1995, 800 international students were surveyed with 300 responses. This was considered a high response rate and indication of strong support for such a program within the international student community. In brief, the results showed that international students perceived strong needs in the following areas:

- (a) Writing for academic and professional purposes.
- (b) Oral presentation skills: these skills were strongly perceived as necessary vocational skills in the work force as well as necessary for the successful attainment of good grades at university.

- (c) Linguistics, particularly in the area of grammar and vocabulary was requested with strong emphasis on discipline specific terminology and syntax.
- (d) Acculturation or socialisation: students wrote that they felt 'outside' the Australian social and academic communities. They believed they needed more assistance to integrate effectively through deepening their understanding of the values and responsibilities in Australian contemporary society within and outside of the university.

Further, it was clear that the mastery of the language of specialist areas (Language for Specific Purposes) was an urgent need — the language of Commerce, Engineering, Informatics and Art/Creative Arts being the main ones. Finally, 71 (24%) survey respondents indicated that they would take out a major in English Language Studies if it were offered.

Structure of the English Language Studies Major

As a result of the survey and consultation, the ELS Working Party recommended that:

- (a) the ELS major be available, in the first instance, to non-English speaking background students defined as 'students who have undertaken their secondary studies primarily in a language other than English.' This definition was deliberately inclusive to recognise the English language development needs of both international and local students. Following evaluation, the major would then be made available to native speakers of English in an appropriately modified form. Further, English language studies needs to be made available to NESB graduate students while they are enrolled in their respective graduate programs.
- (b) the ELS major be constructed in such a manner to facilitate it being taken as a single, or a double major as well as within a double degree in Arts/

Commerce, Arts/Informatics, Arts/Engineering, Arts/Creative Arts etc. It would consist of approximately 60 credit points.

- (c) the ELS core subjects place emphasis on the following four areas:
 - Oral presentation skills;
 - Writing for academic purposes;
 - Development of meta-language (language about language);
 - Cultural literacy in the university context.
- (d) the Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) needs to be addressed but only following a general introduction to the common features of academic writing. The common features in academic writing such as nominalisation, lexical density, technicality and abstraction are to be addressed at 100 level. Discipline specific aspects of the various academic genres are to be presented in the 200 and 300 level subjects.
- (e) the major be taught by using the expertise of staff within both the Faculty of Arts and Education as well as the Learning Development Centre.
- (f) the cultural literacy component of the major requires the development of close ties between the English Language Studies staff and other staff across Faculties to assist in the teaching of topic specific language.

The 100 level subjects

Following the recommendations of the ELS working party, the 100 level ELS subjects were developed with the following features.

The 100 level core subjects have a strong orientation to the generic features of academic written and spoken texts. ELS 151: An Introduction to English for Academic Purposes is the first subject in the major. It comprises of three hours per week: one lecture with one 'speaking' tutorial and one 'writing' tutorial. The major topics in the subject include:

- Macro-organisation: genre, schematic structure and language variation

- Taxonomies: developing and using abstract taxonomies
- Micro-organisation: Theme and thematic development
- features of spoken and written texts
- nominalisation
- cohesion: conjunction and reference
- Formality in language
- Opinion in academic texts.

The second subject in the major at 100 level is ELS 152: English Language Studies 1. This subject comprises of four face-to-face hours per week: two lectures and two tutorials similar to ELS 151 with the exception of the second lecture. The purpose of the second lecture is to contextualise and explain the intellectual tradition in which an Australian university is located. At the same time, students are introduced to how English is used as a meaning resource to construct and perpetuate this tradition. This is achieved by presenting a series of special topic lectures which are supported by the tutorials. These special topic lectures have been presented by guest lecturers who have kindly donated their time and expertise. The special topics are listed below:

- Criticism and Analysis in the Western Tradition
- The Eastern Tradition
- Intellectual Traditions in Indigenous Australia
- The language and culture of Visual Arts
- Reconstructing and interpreting events in History and Politics
- The language of Sociology
- The language and culture in Statistical Inquiry
- Spoken and written language in Mathematics
- Reading and producing diagrams and graphs in Engineering
- The language of Information Systems and working with computers
- Transforming experience into knowledge in Science
- Language and Computer Science.

Observations

The ELS teaching staff are now coming to the end of the first year of offering the two 100 level subjects. A number of recurring issues have been exercising our minds over the last two semesters which are worth mentioning. These issues seem to be more related to the cultural literacy component of the subjects rather than to the English language development component.

The issue of cultural literacy is a vexing one. Local Australian students have been participating in Australian society well before they enter university. This exposure means that they are familiar with the cultural preoccupation of questioning: questioning standards, values, behaviours; debating issues in public forums; questioning the validity of one's argument; questioning the effectiveness of a system, raising the issues of social justice versus economic rationalism; protesting. This process of questioning is "natural", expected, assumed. Even if a local student has never been inside a university before, that student will not be surprised or concerned when faced with the task of questioning. It is part of our western intellectual tradition. This tradition nurtures observation, hypothesising, evaluation and interpretation. We have Socrates to thank for this method of inquiry. My point is that cultural literacy is based on the intellectual traditions that a society values and upholds. Not all cultures share the same intellectual traditions and literacy in one tradition does not translate as literacy in another. This has serious implications in the classroom.

The students in the ELS classrooms clearly are not familiar with our intellectual traditions. They have been active players in another tradition. They know the rules in that tradition but not ours. This manifests itself in a number of different ways. In many cases, they do not know how to i)organise information, ii) formulate questions of inquiry, iii) construct a logical argument iv) research independently etc.

The students' inability to organise information relates in part to the western obsession with taxonomies. We

organise everything into parts and wholes, into any number of related groups. We take processes, activities, happenings, turn them into objects and things which are then subject to investigation. This intellectual process produces, amongst other things, taxonomies. These taxonomies are original ones, the result of a new line of investigation. We ask our students to organise in new and original ways. Many of the ELS students are not able to do this. They can reproduce existing structures but not necessarily create new ones. The reproductive capability is not something we, in our intellectual tradition, value. The students' expertise at reproduction is not recognised as a useful ability. In some cases, we perceive it as laziness or even cheating. The salient point is that we have to teach these students how to create taxonomies and explain why it is important intellectually and give them explicit models to use as a guide.

The western intellectual tradition encourages us to view change as a positive concept. In order to bring about change, existing practices, processes, institutions are subjected to scrutiny. This scrutiny requires the formulation of evaluative questions. We ask the question because our intellectual tradition encourages us to. But change and the subsequent evaluative questions are not necessarily valued in other traditions. Again, if we want the ELS students to formulate evaluative questions, then we have to teach them how, give them situations and models with which to practice.

Developing a logical argument, understanding that the argument needs evidence to support it, acknowledging the source from which the evidence is taken: these activities need to be taught. From our experience, setting an assignment without each step clearly explained by models and scaffolded exercises to support the assignment questions, the students are left with only the knowledge of their own intellectual tradition to fall back on. Inevitably, they produce something inappropriate. Further, the use of assessment as a vehicle for developing a student's understanding of the topic is not enough. Assessment is an end point. The

ELS students need 'road' signs, explicit explanations and examples along the way.

These issues have framed our curriculum development. By this I mean, we have used this knowledge to build a cyclical curriculum rather than a linear one. The cyclical curriculum revisits the same issues but at ever deeper and more challenging levels. By way of example, the 100 level subjects look at reading strategies firstly pointing out that reading is purposeful, and strategic with practice opportunities and assessable tasks, while the second cycle looks at ways to capture the gist of the reading, how to summarise it, how to build a logical taxonomy that relates to the essay/assignment question and or topic.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum as an entrance into our intellectual tradition and subsequent writing practices is of concern to us. At the beginning and end of each subject, students are asked to write a short essay. In this way, we are able to observe the writing development of the student and assess where improvement is occurring and where it is not. We expect to adapt the subject content over time to address areas of need not yet incorporated into the subjects.

Concluding remarks

The English Language Studies major seeks to address the implicit process of induction to university literacy in an Australian context. It seeks to illustrate, explain and scaffold written and spoken academic texts so that students learn the processes in a transparent and explicit manner. This will enable better access and more equity in learning at a tertiary level: students will benefit from on-going English language development; they will have a better understanding of the socialisation process they experience at university; they will become critical consumers and producers of academic English as well as performing more satisfactorily in their other subjects while at the University of Wollongong.

The English Language Studies major is also very beneficial to this university's international profile. It

sends a strong message to our overseas students that their particular needs are catered for, that they can expect support in their English language development and that this development is recognised, appreciated and rewarded.

References

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