Meeting the Needs of International Postgraduate Students: Modifying the EAP Curriculum for Masters Preparation Programs

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A variety of access pathways to university study has meant that international students are entering postgraduate study initially with a lower entry level of English than in previous years. Preparing these students for study at postgraduate level is a considerable challenge for both lecturers and students. This paper investigates the changing focus of a Masters preparation program at the University of Canberra College. The curriculum has moved away from a broad-based approach to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction to focus more strongly on discipline-specific instruction.

This paper reports on the curriculum changes introduced to prepare international students to meet the linguistic and intellectual demands of their masters programs. An initial evaluation of this program by students and staff suggests that introducing discipline-based ESL (English as a second language) instruction is more relevant to student needs than a course based solely on general academic English preparation. Additions to our EAP menu have resulted in some interesting intended outcomes in terms of improvements in student reading, and unintended outcomes in their research and writing skills. An entrée of ‘survival strategies’ explicitly taught on the one hand, and those developed by students themselves, appear to go hand in hand towards bridging the gap between their English language skills and the requirements of academic study.

INTRODUCTION

The particular course which is the subject of this paper is called ‘English for Postgraduate Studies’ and is the second level of English instruction in the International Access Program offered to international students in the University of Canberra College foundation program.

International students in mainstream postgraduate programs face a considerable challenge in coping with the demands of academic study at that level. A major concern for curriculum developers in this program has been how best to assist students to make the transition from the non-specialist English language programs typically introduced in intensive English classes to that of the academic mainstream. Although a number of changes have been adopted, the introduction of a specialist content-based reading program has been a major focus of the curriculum modifications.

The idea of linking language learning with content has been advocated by researchers and theorists for over 17 years (Mohan 1986; Brooks 1988; Guyer and Peterson 1988; Benesch 1988 and 1992; Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989; Cargill 1996; Kasper 1997 and Bretag, Horrocks & Smith 2002 among others).

The work of Kasper (1995, 1997) provided new insights into the effectiveness of content-based courses. Studies by Kasper indicate that students in content-based ESL courses achieve higher scores in reading proficiency and higher pass rates in ESL courses than do students enrolled in non-content-based ESL courses (1997). This may be explained by the fact that students in content-based ESL courses are presented with material drawn from students’ own specialisations where the main focus is initially on the acquisition of information. Through this process, Brinton et al (1989) explain that ‘as students acquire information through sophisticated linguistic input, they move to more advanced levels of language processing’ (p.310), thus facilitating both their development of English language skills and their ability to perform in their mainstream academic subject areas.
Another argument for the content-based approach is based on affective factors, such as motivation and interest. Research has shown that the more content-specific the course, the more students will find it relevant and useful to their immediate needs (Jordan 1997).

This paper reports on a qualitative study into the effectiveness of introducing specialist content into a postgraduate preparation program, where English language and academic reading skills were taught through the medium of subject-matter content taken from mainstream academic subjects. The results of our initial investigation suggest that exposure to subject-specific learning materials not only assists students in coping with the demands of their university mainstream subjects, but also better prepares them to make the transition between the general EAP course to the mainstream university postgraduate program.

THE CONTEXT OF THE IAP PROGRAM

English proficiency. At present, there are two levels of English language instruction offered in the Masters foundation program. As stated previously, the various foundation levels are known as the International Access Program (IAP). It is a foundation course for Masters students administered by the University of Canberra College. Staff from the School of Languages and International Education at the University of Canberra design and teach the English units in the program.

Students may enter the first level of the program (IAP 1) with an IELTS score of 5.5 on the Academic Module to undertake a ten-week course consisting of broad-based language instruction and an introduction to study skills, such as essay structure, oral presentations and reading strategies. Successful graduates from IAP 1 are joined by other students with an IELTS score of 6.0, who are entering the program for the first time at the second level. This level consists of 10 hours of academic English in combination with two mainstream subjects. The English subject is called ‘English for Postgraduate Studies’ and the two mainstream Masters subjects are credited towards the final Master’s degree. Therefore, at this level, students already encounter a large volume of reading, writing and oral work within their specialisations. Currently these specialisations include Masters degrees in Marketing and Communication, International Business, Business Administration, Finance and Accounting and Information Technology.

Student background. Students enter the Masters program with an undergraduate degree from their home country. Most come from the countries of South-East and North-East Asia, in particular Thailand, China and Taiwan. Often the educational experience of these students has been markedly different from that which they encounter in Australia.

The culture of the home country and the learning styles experienced in the undergraduate degree has a profound impact on the students’ adjustment to the tertiary environment of an Australian university. There are a number of demands placed on overseas students which may differ from their previous experiences. These include the large volume of reading, the research-based nature of written assignment work, the need for critical thinking, especially the abilities to evaluate and speculate and the role of oral participation and presentations.

CHALLENGES IN READING

A new challenge for many international students is the extent to which individual and wide-ranging reading underpins and impinges upon almost all aspects of university study in Australia, particularly at this level; hence our focus on a specialist content-based reading program. Wilson (2003) alludes to the serious difficulties faced by overseas students in academic reading. She points to the large volume and time consuming nature of reading, in particular for those who have little experience of academic texts. Reid, Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (1998) found that overseas students took two to three times longer to read a given academic text than an English-speaking background student.
Reading requirements of graduate programs. In order to determine whether these concerns were also reflected among our international postgraduate students, University of Canberra lecturers from the various Masters specialisations were surveyed on the importance of and requirements for reading in their particular subjects. They nominated a number of areas of importance. A lecturer from the management area commented that, 'Reading is central to the subject area'. There can be no effective analysis, comprehension and application without reading as a basis'. She stressed that specialist and technical language was needed to provide the 'scientific basis of analysis and reflection'. Students needed good reading skills so that they could understand the concepts and in turn 'transmit their competency in written and oral communication tasks', including the ability to fully understand the requirements of examination questions.

Another lecturer from the management area pointed to the necessity of graduates to be able to 'critically evaluate theoretical perspectives and be able to use critical thinking to explain why a particular theory is not appropriate in certain practical situations'. He saw reading as a 'critical foundation skill in discussing and writing at a graduate level'. Indeed, the need for critical reflection upon and evaluation of ideas and concepts in the reading was a recurring theme in the responses. Native speakers also experienced difficulty in this area, but non-native speakers were seen to be at a particular disadvantage 'in comprehending what is being said' and the 'cultural implications underpinning much of the material which native speakers can comprehend with little difficulty'.

Observations of English teaching staff. English teachers in the program have noted additional demands in the academic reading that students encounter. Of significance is the wide variety of reading texts, which range from core texts, academic journal articles, case studies and diagrammatical material through to items from the popular press, newspaper articles and advertisements.

Teachers have also become increasingly aware of the particular nature of the engagement with texts, particularly at postgraduate level, and the difficulty of presenting this to students from another culture. In academic reading in the western education system, one is expected to distance oneself from the text in an objective way in order to evaluate a text in terms of its validity, bias and assumptions, while also 'getting up close and personal' to evaluate and speculate on the text in relation to one's own reactions, concerns and professional interest. Atkinson and Longman (2003) advise that practice in critical thinking helps students to 'find, sort, evaluate and choose wisely' both throughout one's daily life and through the vicarious experience of reading.

Critical thinking involves drawing valid conclusions, finding the author's perspective and assessing problems and issues. Through practice, you learn to make more informed and better choices (p. 223).

This may represent a different world-view for the NESB student, namely one in which the pupil is asked to engage in an individualistic way with the material at hand. Students in a western education system are not so much asked to accept the 'master discourse' for the benefit of all concerned in a particular enterprise, but to pick and choose, embrace, reject, apply, make meaning with or modify according to one's own objectives and inclinations. Students from other cultures may not know what it entails to critically evaluate a given text within a particular context. Lack of competence in this area can adversely affect the written and spoken output of the student.

THE ORIGINAL CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

The first two intakes of students undertook a subject (English for Postgraduate Studies, IAP Level 2) which was different in several respects to the one on offer now. The original curriculum framework was based on a combination of two models, the skills-based curriculum and the general theme-based model. Reading formed the core activity for the exploration of six broad social themes, around which many of the classroom tasks and major assessment items were based. Although students were engaged in language
and skills-based practice through a theme-based approach, the broad topics covered did not always appear to be relevant to students’ immediate needs. Since this English subject was designed to run concurrently with other mainstream academic subjects, the original curriculum framework was intended to equip students with the necessary skills and language to cope with the realities of their specialisations. However, from anecdotal evidence from mainstream lecturers, it seemed that students were not able to transfer many of these competencies into their other subjects.

This lack of interconnectedness between the general theme-based approach and mainstream content courses and the lack of transferability became an area of our great concern to us. In view of the huge challenge our students faced at postgraduate level, we considered the issue of offering reading materials and writing tasks more closely related to their studies. The student evaluations and comments from lecturers revealed a gap between the EAP program offered to learners and their mainstream content courses and the modified curriculum was aimed at addressing this issue.

THE MODIFIED CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

In light of these problems, it was proposed that where possible, the content-based approach to TESOL curriculum design where language and, in this case, academic skills, could be effectively taught through subject-matter content (Gaffield-Vile 1996) would be one of the most suitable methods to bridge the gap between the more traditional current EAP framework and the mainstream content courses. In conjunction with academic mainstream staff we attempted to determine how a course of this nature could be developed.

It was decided that the modified curriculum framework would use content from a particular academic subject where possible as a vehicle for the transmission of language, vocabulary, study skills and appropriate academic conventions. The aims of this program would be twofold in nature: in the short term, to facilitate the comprehension of content material by equipping students with appropriate academic skills to cope with the demands of their content courses; and in the long term, to ensure that students improve overall English language proficiency. A number of curriculum modifications were introduced, and a ‘paired-reading program’ was the first and most significant of these changes.

PAIRED-READING PROGRAM

It was decided that a modified form of a paired-content reading course, based on the model from Kasper (1995) would be implemented. Thus once a week students would break into groups according to their specialisation for a two-hour weekly reading class, in which all texts paralleled topics and readings as they were studied in that mainstream class. In this case, the content-based readings in the EAP program would, it was hoped, be studied one week in advance of the weekly readings to prepare the students effectively for the lecture and tutorial sessions. This arrangement formed the basis for the qualitative investigation into subject-specific reading.

In light of the reading requirements of postgraduate programs and the serious reading difficulties NESB students face, a ‘top-down’ approach to reading seemed useful and applicable to our own context, particularly in the development of academic reading skills. This approach assumes that the reader will make use of his/her own ‘schema’ or prior knowledge to aid in the interpretation and comprehension of reading material (Parry 1987:61). Wilson and Bell (1997) incorporate the use of top-level rhetorical structures to facilitate reading in Critical Reading Strategies. Accordingly we adapted their reading course to our students’ needs by including the reading material provided by lecturers in the mainstream subjects and used the top-down reading strategies outlined. These typically involved skimming, scanning, identifying main ideas, summary writing and discussion.

Initially, this approach worked very well, but as the reading material became more difficult, students were overwhelmed by the complexity of language used and the classes became preoccupied with simply
understanding the terminology and grasping the content. Wilson (2003) affirms that a top-down approach may be inappropriate when students need to understand dense academic text as was the case here. Therefore, at this point, the ‘bottom-up’ approach where students were involved in working with strategies for word and sentence-level comprehension was adopted to help students acquire comprehension of the content. This meant determining important concepts, identifying and explaining information sentence by sentence in simplified English.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A qualitative study on the effectiveness of the specialist-reading program was carried out. Written responses of students and lecturers to an evaluation questionnaire were collected and analysed. Students were asked to comment on a series of points concerning the relevance and appropriateness of the readings and their associated tasks, and to elaborate on possible ways that the readings were helpful. The evaluation forms were collected from 81 students over three semesters from 2002 to early 2004.

The student response to the specialist content reading program has been overwhelmingly positive with the exception of some of the students from the Information Technology specialisation. These students follow an individually tailored program according to their prior knowledge, and we are not able to choose readings that all are currently studying. Students from the other specialisations made such comments as, ‘Readings in this subject are very useful in preparing for academic course’, or ‘It’s useful to help me understand more about my subject – Organisational Behaviour – because most of the readings selected are related to the course and the teacher analyses them and explains them. It’s really very helpful’. Another student remarked, ‘The readings have been helpful because the teacher explain to me before I go to class. And, then when I join in the class, it makes me understand more’.

Lecturers from the different disciplines were also asked to evaluate the reading program using a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions and headings. Lecturers were asked to comment on the reading requirements of their subjects, the role of reading and the possible difficulties that students faced. They were also asked to comment on whether or not reading comprehension and student performance in the subject had improved since the introduction of the content-based reading program. Lecturers who responded were very positive and requested the extension of the reading program into undergraduate foundation courses.

OTHER MODIFICATIONS TO THE READING AND WRITING COMPONENTS OF THE CURRICULUM.

The relevance of social themes. Reading on social themes has been considered an important aspect of the course. It is hoped that these themes introduce students to some of the issues currently under discussion in Australia, and provide a broader context for their academic studies. In view of the time pressures, it was decided that five of the original broad themes would be retained from the original curriculum. These include, ‘Studying in the Australian tertiary environment’, ‘The role and responsibility of the media’, ‘Social change’, ‘The workplace of the 21st century’ and ‘The endless technological revolution’. These themes were seen to provide a useful context to the students’ studies in other disciplines. Not only do they provide background knowledge on Australians and their culture, but also display the thought patterns and/or attitudinal changes in western thought, which underpin some of the underlying values and assumptions inherent in the masters specialisations. The response by students in course evaluations has been positive in regard to the readings on social themes.

Substitution of newspaper and journal articles. While items from the media form part of the reading requirements for those students in the Marketing and Communication area, a broader range of material would seem to be desirable for students from all disciplines. So, where possible newspaper and magazine
articles have been substituted with related material from the type of texts that students are expected to read on a regular basis.

**Press and journal reports.** An important tool in the development of the reading, written and oral components of the course has been the regular presentation of press reports. Students have been required to select an appropriate item from the print media and summarise it and critically evaluate it in writing and then present the item in the form of a short oral report. Academic staff from the Communications discipline endorsed this task enthusiastically, and suggested helpful additions such as the identification of and speculation on potential attitudes of the ‘stakeholders’ as indicated explicitly or implicitly in the particular article. In addition to press reports, and as a further curriculum modification, students are now also required to present a summary and critical review of a journal article from their specialist area.

**MODIFICATIONS TO THE WRITTEN AND ORAL TASKS**

The major assignment on general social issue topics became a ‘Special Project’ on a topic or aspect of their specialist subject. In the initial program, students were required to research and write their assignments on a particular social or environmental issue, but much of the material they researched was irrelevant to their area of study. From these modifications we have discovered some outcomes which are both intended and unintended.

**INTENDED OUTCOMES**

A research project is currently underway to both qualitatively and quantitatively measure the effectiveness of the content-based reading instruction on student performance at the University of Canberra. (Maldoni, Kennelly and Brewer, research in progress). At present, we are limited to the self-reported responses of students and teaching staff on the effectiveness of this instruction. As mentioned previously the content-based reading program has been overwhelmingly endorsed by most students in each semester’s evaluations. They have reported increased confidence and comprehension of the subject area. From student evaluations of the other aspects of the course, eg. instruction and practice in ‘study skills’ such as essay writing and giving oral presentations, it is clear that these are deemed to be useful by the students.

An interesting observation of teachers has been that students seem to perform better when writing in their specialist area than when given topics of a broad social nature. It appears that they are able to incorporate the typical forms of expression from the discipline into their writing, and in turn, demonstrate an understanding of those forms and principles in their writing. This leads to a general improvement in the academic ‘tone’ of the writing and assists the student in avoiding so many sentence structure errors. This occurs even in examination questions based on their specialist subjects and under conditions where there are no materials to copy from. A text-analysis of the quality of their content-based writing compared to their output on general social themes would make an informative study. Clearly mainstream classes have also played a very big role in this growing familiarity with the genre. Setting research and writing tasks within the discipline area also provides a useful insight for the teacher, and enables him/her to focus on those forms of expression.

**UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**

This increasing emphasis on writing tasks based on their own subject area has also revealed a possible downside. Are we simply helping the students to become more expert plagi-phrasers (Wilson 1997)? By encouraging them to read and write on such complex ideas from their subject-specialisations, are they only half-digesting our advice and instruction?
Even ESL teachers find it difficult to detect plagi-phrasing, or more tellingly, to judge when it has gone too far. Are we inadvertently teaching them how much they can get away with? Sometimes those who plagi-phrase are richly rewarded with high scores, while those who genuinely summarise and synthesize texts are penalised for producing poorly expressed ideas. This can be even more difficult for non-ESL teachers to detect as they are frequently less able to make clear judgments on a students’ English level and thus on the likelihood of plagiarism.

**CONCLUSION**

Increasingly, elements of the English for Postgraduate Studies course revolve around developing ‘survival’ strategies. Thus, students are assisted in producing creditable written and oral work, despite poor performance in more general language areas. But is this in fact all we can realistically expect from students who enter postgraduate courses with limited English language skills and knowledge of tertiary learning/teaching environment in Australia?

Since the introduction of the English for Postgraduate Studies course, we have added a considerably variety to the menu. And we have tried to have our cake and eat it too by keeping many of the more traditional dishes on the EAP menu, while adding a range of other tastes and side-dishes. More curriculum modifications will undoubtedly be necessary. We must try to meet the needs of our postgraduate students, but avoid leaving them with half-digested and developed concepts and skills in the process.

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