Conceptualising the English language needs of first year university students

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Abstract

Australian universities are currently re-evaluating how they address the English language needs of their students of non-English speaking backgrounds. This is, in part, a response to ten "Good Practice Principles" that constitute the main thrust of a government-commissioned document released in 2009 and designed to ensure that standards of good practice are established and maintained throughout the sector in respect of English language provision. This paper argues that any attempt to uphold these principles and implement provision that is coherent, relevant and rigorous, requires clarification of the concept of "proficiency." To this end, a distinction is proposed between proficiency, academic literacy and professional communication skills, and consideration is given to the implications of this distinction in terms of (a) responding to the language needs of both native speaker and non-native speaker students, and (b) the post-enrolment language assessment of newly-enrolled students with a view to identifying those at risk.

Background

In recent years, the nature of Australian universities has changed quite fundamentally in response to a variety of factors including: the globalisation of education; a growing migrant population; financial imperatives resulting from changing funding models; government initiatives to increase the flow-through of students from secondary to higher education; and efforts, fuelled by the 2008 publication of the Bradley Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008), to promote the widening participation agenda by opening up higher education to a more socio-economically diverse spread of the population through means such as equity or enabling programs.

These developments have had particular repercussions for students' English language competency. There is an increasingly widespread perception within higher education that the language and literacy skills of students of both English speaking backgrounds (ESB) and non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) is in a state of decline—a situation which, some would argue, has forced lecturers to "tone down" their course materials and spend time addressing English language problems many regard as outside the scope of their expertise and locus of responsibility (e.g. Abelson, 2005). This calls into question the quality and depth of the knowledge base and English language competency with which these students exit their programs of study, and thus of their employability and readiness to enter an Australian workforce which, increasingly, is expected by employers to demonstrate strong language and communication skills (Birrell & Healey, 2008; Burch, 2008) as well as technical competence in their discipline areas.

Students who enter university lacking the English competency necessary to pursue their studies effectively can suffer anxiety, frustration, de-motivation and an inability to engage with the learning process. Professional courses that involve work placements, such as education, pharmacy and nursing, can be particularly problematic and result in high levels of student stress and even expulsion if they are unable to meet the communicative demands involved. Similarly, instances of plagiarism can mean that some students end up facing disciplinary boards and penalties they can often ill afford, despite the fact that such plagiarism may be inadvertent, culturally driven and/or the result of a strategy to compensate for inadequate language skills. Students facing these kinds of situations may ultimately opt to withdraw from their studies, a decision which can carry with it the stigma of "failure" within their families and/or cultures and thus represent a source of real trauma. Equally, those for whom language competence is not an issue can and do become frustrated as they see their own progress as being hampered by students who, they may feel, should not be enrolled in degree programs if they do not have the language skills needed to cope and keep up. Such feelings intensify when, as tends to happen, NESB students cluster together for course tasks and activities or receive "special" attention in the form of credit-bearing English courses their native-speaker peers sometimes perceive as soft options (Baik & Greig, 2009, p. 405). For their part, lecturers can feel awkward and confounded by students who struggle with the language, sometimes opting to ignore them and/or simply directing them to learning advisers in the hope that they will be able to "sort them out." Such reactions serve only to further marginalise these already vulnerable individuals: it places them within a deficit frame, lowers their sense of confidence, self-esteem and "right to be there," and deprives them of the kind of input and interaction that is vital to their educational and linguistic development.

The good practice principles

Against this background, a document was circulated to universities early in 2009 entitled *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities* (GPP) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). It was the product of a project undertaken by a Steering Committee convened by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) with the purpose of enhancing the quality of English language provision at universities by having a sector-wide mechanism for its monitoring and evaluation. The document reads:

> The expectation of the project Steering Committee is that universities will consider the Principles as they would consider other guidelines on good practice. As part of AUQA quality audits universities can expect to be asked about the way they have addressed the Principles, just as they are likely to be asked by AUQA auditors about their application of a range of other external reference documents for the university sector. (DEEWR, 2009, p. 2)

The GPP document implicitly recognises the fact of burgeoning numbers of NESB students entering higher education in Australia, the benefits they bring with them, and the moral responsibility universities have to ensure that, having admitted them, these students are given the support they need to succeed in their studies and fulfil their academic potential. In responding to the document, Australian universities have been re-evaluating their English language provision and, in particular, the mechanisms they have in place for screening students pre-enrolment, methods for identifying newly enrolled students in need of language support as early as possible post-enrolment, and determining the most effective way of delivering support to those most at risk due to weak language skills. This paper proposes a model for conceptualising English language provision post-enrolment and, in doing so, seeks to demonstrate that any such conceptualisation has ramifications for the nature of post-enrolment English language testing.

Conceptualising English language support: A tripartite division of competencies

The GPP document offers a useful blueprint for how universities can go about ensuring that their English language provision is relevant and robust. It refers throughout to "proficiency," a rather nebulous, ill-defined concept that is used widely within the field of English language teaching, and indeed testing. It defines proficiency as "the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 1), and goes on to state:

> Such uses may range from a simple task such as discussing work with fellow students, to complex tasks such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience. This view of English language as the ability to organise language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of English language proficiency from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure. (p. 1)

Unfortunately, this type of broad catchall definition of "proficiency" fails to capture important distinctions, an articulation of which is helpful, if not critical, to the process of conceptualising and, ultimately, implementing a model of English language provision for newly-enrolled students. Specifically, unpacking the notion of proficiency reveals three competences: English language proficiency, academic literacy and professional

communication skills (Murray, in press). Although these competencies interact in various and complex ways, and in theorising about and considering the pedagogies of one we inevitably invoke the others, they can also be clearly differentiated.

English language proficiency

Proficiency can be defined as a language user's control of the formal and functional properties of language such that they are able to express and understand meaning accurately, fluently, and appropriately according to context. Tuition in proficiency takes as its starting point the notion of communicative competence, first coined and explicated by Hymes (1972) and subsequently by others—most notably Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983) and Bachman (1990). Canale and Swain's iteration is perhaps the one that has been most commonly invoked in language teaching and it comprises four components: grammatical competence (concerned with the well-formedness of language), sociolinguistic competence (the ability to be appropriate with language), discourse competence (knowledge of the connections between utterances in a text to form a meaningful whole), and strategic competence (the ability to compensate for imperfect language knowledge). "Proficiency" refers to a general competence in language and as such comprises a set of generic skills and abilities captured in Canale and Swain's framework and reflected in tuition that focuses on areas including grammar and syntax, general listening skills, vocabulary development, general reading and writing skills, the development of communication strategies and, an area frequently ignored, the pragmatics of communication and associated concerns with politeness, implicature and inference. Most importantly, students require opportunities to develop fluency and the confidence to deploy their formal and functional knowledge of the language in authentic contexts both within and outside the academic environment.

These generic skills and abilities represent an investment in language that can be "cashed in" in *any* potential context of use. For first year undergraduate NESB students, they provide an entrée to engagement without which many will feel peripheral, isolated and unfulfilled. As will become apparent, they are also prerequisites to developing academic literacy and professional communication skills, and their importance to academic success is well documented in the literature (Elder, 1993; Johnson, 1988; Light, Xu & Mossop, 1987; Tonkin 1995).

Academic literacy

Academic literacy has been defined as "the capacity to undertake study and research, and to communicate findings and knowledge, in a manner appropriate to the particular disciplinary conventions and scholarly standards expected at university level" (University of Western Australia, 2005). This linking of academic literacy to disciplines highlights the fact that academic literacy is pluralistic in nature (we can speak of "academic literacies"): not only are there a number of sub-literacies of which academic literacy is comprised but each discipline area has associated with it a particular set of literacy practices with which those involved in the discipline need to become conversant and which effectively help define and differentiate that discipline.

This fundamental link with discipline distinguishes an academic literacies model from a study skills approach which assumes that

> literacy is a set of itemised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The focus is on attempts to "fix" problems with student learning, which are treated as a kind of pathology. The theory of language on which it is based emphasises surface features, grammar and spelling. (Lea & Street 1998, p. 158)

The academic literacies model is less crude and insensitive and

> sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evoke." (p. 159)

These "settings," or disciplines, are, as Rex and McEachen (1999) note, recognised not only by specialised vocabularies, concepts and knowledges, but also by accepted and valued patterns of meaning-making activity (genres, rhetorical structures, argument formulations, narrative devices etc.) and ways of contesting meaning.

The study skills approach, then, takes a one-size-fits-all view of academic literacy, typically dislocating its subject matter from particular disciplinary contexts. It is an approach commonly adopted by English for academic purposes and pathway programs and widely reinforced by published materials but which is out of kilter with the notion of academic literacy as something that is intimately and fundamentally tied to a particular domain of application.

With this notion of "academic literacies" (plural) in mind, it can be helpful to think about items in the following sample list of "areas of focus commonly adopted within the teaching of English for academic purposes" as parameters some of which will need setting in accordance with the requirements of particular discipline areas and the *literacies* associated with them.

Sourcing information (information literacy)	*Managing information*
Active and effective reading	*Note-making*
Analysis, critical reflection and evaluation	*Writing genres*
Voice and identity in academic discourse	*Seminar skills*
Plagiarism, referencing conventions and paraphrase	*Oral presentations*
Designing, implementing and reporting research	*Study habits*
Editing and proofreading	*Using data/statistics*

While items such as *editing and proof-reading* and *study habits* lend themselves to more generic presentation, others such as *designing, implementing and reporting research, referencing conventions, writing genres* and *using data/statistics* do not.

Professional communication skills

Although at one level it is nonsensical to talk of academic literacy and language proficiency without presupposing some degree of communication, there is another level at which

professional communication skills can be regarded as something other than proficiency or academic literacy. This becomes apparent when one considers that a native speaker of English, fully proficient by definition and perhaps even with advanced academic literacy skills, may not necessarily be a good communicator.

From the outset of their university careers, all students, ESB as well as NESB, need to develop skills and strategies for communicating in an academic environment according to the particular demands of their discipline as well as those of the profession into which they eventually hope to enter. As we have seen, in those subjects that typically involve work placements or practicums as part of degree programs, being able to communicate is essential if students are to complete their placements successfully. Once admitted to the workplace, graduates need to go on and demonstrate that they have communication skills that are developed enough to ensure they can engage effectively in their respective professional contexts.

Being an effective communicator involves a number of skills or competencies all of which answer to Good Practice Principle 8, which recognises the importance of students' being able "to adapt to their academic, social and linguistic environments" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 10) as well as their work environments. These include:

Intercultural competence - the ability to work well across cultures and to change one's knowledge, attitudes and behaviours so as to better manage cultural difference and unfamiliarity, inter-group dynamics, and the tensions and conflicts that can accompany this process (Alptekin, 2002; Kramsch, 1993). Within the university context, intercultural incompetence can result in students being unable to adapt and accommodate to those around them and consequently facing significant challenges around such issues as independence, autonomy and teamwork, conflict resolution and appropriate engagement in lectures and tutorials. Later, in the workplace, such issues can extend to privacy and confidentiality, sexual orientation, risk management, power relations, leadership, and lines of responsibility.

Good interpersonal skills -   the ability to relate to and interact with others effectively and harmoniously. This entails an appreciation of principles governing the negotiation of relationships—of politeness, face, turn-taking, accommodation, an awareness of self and other, being an effective listener etc. (e.g. Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor, 2001).

Conversancy in the discourses and behaviours associated with particular domains - the ability to understand and use spoken and written language in a way appropriate to and for the specific purposes associated with particular contexts of use; to take on different roles, assume different behaviours, and interact effectively and appropriately according to those contexts.

Non-verbal communication skills -   communication in the absence of words and including an appreciation of eye contact, touch and personal space, gesture, tone of voice, body movement, dress and posture (e.g. Hybels & Weaver, 2001).

Group skills and leadership skills   -   the ability to work as part of a team and, where necessary, to lead others and demonstrate initiative (e.g. Baron, Kerr & Miller, 1996; Lumsden & Lumsden 1997).

Having identified and articulated three key and distinct competencies that underlie proficiency, the question arises as to which first year university students require tuition in which of the respective competency areas.

NESB students and ESB students: Who needs what?

With respect to English language proficiency, despite meeting the English language entry criteria of their receiving institutions, many NESB students still struggle to cope with the linguistic demands of their degree courses as a result of inadequate levels of proficiency, and therefore require language support. While this raises important questions around the suitability of "gate-keeping" tests such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the validity of statements of test equivalence, and the way in which those tests are used by institutions, are questions beyond the scope of this paper. More relevant to current purposes is the fact that, while ESB students are, by definition, fully proficient in English, it is nevertheless sometimes the case that their language also requires attention for it can exhibit what are more accurately described as dialectal forms not in keeping with academic and professional standards and expectations. This fact suggests that, where necessary, this cohort should also have access to support designed to help modify their language behaviour such that it conforms to those standards and expectations. Whether for NESB or ESB students, such support might be integrated into the curriculum via a credit-bearing course, and/or through the kind of extra-curricula interventions typically offered by Learning and Teaching units and comprising consultations, workshops and online materials.

Even where students have advanced English language proficiency, this does not equate to having well developed academic literacy—students may be highly proficient users of English but lack the academic literacies needed to perform well in their studies. Academic literacy is something with which few students, domestic or international, ESB or NESB, enter university adequately equipped. While some students will begin their degree programs having already developed some knowledge of the literacies they will need, courtesy of their secondary school education, levels of such knowledge tend to be highly variable and many international students will bring with them practices from educational cultures not in tune with the expectations of the Western academic tradition. The academic literacies they will require for higher education need to be learned, therefore, and learned within the context of their discipline area, embedded within the curriculum and presented as an integral part of their undergraduate studies. In this way, disciplinary idiosyncrasies can be appropriately and more effectively addressed and learning takes on greater immediacy, relevance and authenticity for students, thereby helping ensure that input becomes intake (Curnow & Liddicoat, 2008). Embedding academic literacy within the curriculum is, then, based on the ideas that (a) *all* newly-enrolled students require tuition in academic literacy, for they come with little or no prior knowledge of it and thus commence their studies on roughly equal terms in this regard; and (b) the teaching of academic literacy should therefore form a normal part of academics' teaching responsibilities. For many institutions, this notion is likely to represent a fairly radical departure from traditional perceptions and practices and will entail some professional development of staff and the adoption of a new mindset. As more universities require newly-appointed academics to undergo higher education teaching courses as part of the probationary process, these would appear to offer a useful vehicle for raising

awareness in new staff of the need to reflect on what academic literacy means for their particular discipline and ways of "mapping it onto" the curriculum and teaching it.

As with academic literacy, there is also a strong argument for embedding communication skills in the curriculum and presenting them within the context of students' discipline areas so as to help ensure that they are most relevant to their current and future disciplinary/ professional needs. The University of South Australia, along with a number of other universities, is already embedding communication skills within course content as part of its efforts to ensure that it is effectively implementing its Graduate Qualities framework and developing students' readiness for the workplace.

Proficiency as the focus of post-enrolment language assessment?

The argument is, then, that all students—NESB and ESB, international and domestic—should receive tuition in academic literacy and professional communication skills, and that such tuition is best delivered strategically embedded within the curriculum. In addition, those NESB students deemed to be at-risk due to weak English should be offered additional tuition in proficiency, and their ESB counterparts' tuition that focuses on modifying dialectal forms that are at odds with academic and professional expectations.

It follows that the only sensible focus of post-enrolment language assessment is proficiency. There is, after all, no point in testing students' academic literacy and communication skills if these are going to be taught as a matter of course to all students as an integral part of the curriculum. There is currently considerable professional dialogue around the nature of post-enrolment language assessment (e.g. Dunworth, 2009) and while it is an issue that warrants a paper in itself given its technical and political complexities, it is perhaps worth emphasising here that whether it takes the form of a test or an early piece of assessed coursework, any assessment procedure needs to encompass not only NESB but also ESB students. While it may be labelled as something other than "proficiency" and will, in part, require a different treatment, the language weaknesses of this increasingly diverse cohort may equally compromise their ability to fulfil their academic potential. As such, if they are to meet their moral obligation, universities need to identify those at risk and intervene in a timely fashion in order to ensure these students have every chance of success as students and graduates.

Conclusion

Factors such as the widening participation agenda and efforts to boost international student enrolments have meant that universities are having to address major challenges around the English language competence of students entering higher education, many of whom lack the language skills they need to meet the demands of their degree courses and, subsequently, those of the workplace. While this is by no means a new issue (e.g. Davies, 2008), the scale of those challenges today is greater than ever and institutions are under unprecedented pressure to respond and ensure they are meeting their duty of care to the students concerned. Despite its failure to explicitly address the needs of ESB students, the GPP document has certainly focused the collective mind of the sector in this regard and served as a catalyst in promoting reflection and, ultimately, change, where necessary. If any such change process is to be well informed and systematic, then its starting point needs to be a clear understanding and articulation of the language and literacy skills NESB *and* ESB students respectively need

to succeed in their studies and the means through which those skills might be imparted. This paper has sought to provide one such articulation. While the model presented may face institutional challenges around its conceptualisation and implementation, in its favour is the fact that in a climate where universities are being required to up their game in respect of English language provision and respond to a set of principles that are set to inform future AUQA audits, there is greater likelihood that the necessary political will exists to ensure that ideas for change get a hearing they might otherwise not.

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