

“Are you from China?” “No, I’m from Hong Kong”: Enabling New Learning Strategies in Academic Essays in Hong Kong.

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Abstract. This essay aims to show how creating an appropriately global learning environment through needs analysis and constructive socialisation, understanding learners intentions through using Biggs’ 3P model and an informed understanding of learning approaches method, enables the teaching of ‘taking a position’ in written academic essays, enabling the adoption of new learning strategies as a result. A case study of English for Academic Purposes in Hong Kong is used as an example.

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Discourse, Essay, English for Academic Purposes, Functional Grammar

1. Introduction

In the first section of this paper it will be shown how for the teacher, managing the learning environment through needs analysis and constructive socialization is necessary, and a better understanding of traditional perceptions of the Asian student and the role of power distance in the classroom better identifies the concerns of modern EAP. EAP students can thus take their first steps towards having a say in a future not just in the interests of China or Hong Kong or the West; but towards a truly global, yet diverse future.

2. Modern EAP and Its Traditions

There is a growing dissatisfaction with graduates’ language use, even when “English continues to function as the principal language of written communication”.¹ In the eyes of Industry and Academia alike, the macro- skill of writing assumes a high priority, accompanied by some concern. In the past the traditional approach was process-oriented emphasising writing preparation activities. The approach has not been research-based and offered only prescriptive advice about the strategies presumed to be necessary for successful writing.

The problem with the traditional approach is that “firstly, that students are not challenged to reflect on their own conceptions of what an essay is in the particular academic discipline in which they are writing and on the different approaches that can be adopted in confronting particular tasks; and secondly, that the outcomes of the process of writing, that is, the written assignments that students present for assessment, are rarely systematically analysed and used to illustrate the prescriptive advice”.²

2.1. The Learning Environment, Needs Analysis and Constructive Socialization

Effective EAP pedagogy must be sensitive to the reality that “learning and socialisation entail a process of gaining competence and membership in a discourse community”.³ This involves not just “acquiring skills (culturally valued ways of participating in academic discourse) but a complex and problematic process that involve(s) struggles over access to resources, conflicts and negotiations between different viewpoints arising from differing degrees of experiences and expertise”.⁴

Of special concern is the outbreak of surface-learning; not as a legitimate ‘shared Confucian heritage’ learning approach variable, but as a competitive strategy of reluctant ‘jumping through the hoops’ to keep parents and lecturers alike happy; and students blissfully none-the-wiser. As has been pointed out in the literature, “it is often the Chinese (mainland and Hong Kong) parents’ decision not only to send their child to study in an English speaking university, but also to decide which degree course the student will follow. Individual student motivation may be displaced by the need on the part of the student to show a return on the

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parent's investment."⁵ Real conflict lies in confronting the rise of student attitudes and acculturation to impoverished learning due to 'safely-distant' positioning to knowledge, as evident in their written work.

2.2. Traditional Perceptions of Asian Students

Traditional characterisations of Asian students "tend to suggest that Asian students are relentless rote learners, surface learners, syllabus dependent, passive and lacking in initiative, not expressive of opinions, and lacking in independence"⁶. Further research reveals this to be false, yet as Kember and Gow suggest "students will generally use a surface approach if 'that is what the curriculum appears to demand'."⁷

Stereotyping of Asian students at its worst can mask poor articulation of expectations at university, and this is twice as bad a problem in an EAP context because the whole goal of the program is to ensure insight into such expectations. Failure to do so in EAP bespeaks failure of the program as a whole. To stop the unhealthy learning consequences of power distance perceptions arising in students' attitudes and practices is to recognise that "English learning at the tertiary level is both a process of acquiring language skills, and a process of understanding... how they are related to the learning community, the national sociocultural context and the imagined global community."⁸ It is useful for teachers in this context to recognise...bicultural identities which entail both a local identity and a global identity that "gives them a sense of belonging to a worldwide culture."⁹

3. Reconciling Differences in 1st Year Lecturer's Essay Expectations

Significant differences in writing requirements can occur between units in different disciplines including differences in the discourse patterns adopted and the linguistic frames used to analyse knowledge. Not only that but "the student, in learning how to write appropriately for each discipline, is actually embarking on a process of initiation into the culture of that discipline, through which he or she must learn what kinds of meanings are appropriate to reproduce, what kinds of questions appropriate to ask, and so on."¹⁰

3.1. Text in Context and Genre

In order to explore this relationship between text and context, the theory of systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1985) provides a systematic means of analysing the text in terms of its context. The theory serves to explain the way that the resources of language can be deployed to create different meanings, according to the social function being served within a defined context."²

Some confusion during the initiation process may arise in the university context as it is "one of analysis, criticism, argumentation, substantiation of claims, acknowledgement of others' ideas, and so on, while the subculture of each discipline within the overall academic culture determines different epistemological approaches, and distinctive ways of thinking".² Of particular difficulty to the Hong Kong students is the fact that "unlike oral discourse patterns, academic texts do not depend on shared experiences and thus are governed by a different set of lexical and grammatical resources."¹¹

As Thomas (1994) in his article entitled 'A discourse approach to ESP' said "in a genre-based essay-writing course, a completed essay would be used to show students what a good essay looks like, using annotations to explain the virtues of the essay. The rationale for modelling the product in this way is the recognition of the need to expose to the learner a new way of thinking about the world through seeing how others have seen and represented the world. Thus, the process of thinking through a problem is addressed retrospectively through the illustrative text under scrutiny".¹² [I]ncreased ability to recognize and conceptualise the organisation of a text"¹¹ both 'as read' and 'as writing' is useful and overcomes the process-only limitations of traditional EAP.

In learning essays and how to establish a stance "students need to be able to analyse authentic contextualised examples of writing, so as to reflect on the processes necessary for achieving those products. This involves making explicit the normally implicit ways that writers approach their work, and bringing to conscious awareness the way that written texts are mirrors of the interaction between the writer and the cultural domain."¹²

As is further highlighted by Thomas this helps learners "(1) understand that information can be organized

and presented in different ways depending on the purposes of writing; (2) develop skills and strategies for synthesizing and integrating information in ways expected by the university discourse community; and (3) learn ways of thinking and reasoning required by academic writing tasks”.¹²

3.2. Biggs’ 3p Model: ‘Deep’ and ‘Surface’ Learning Approaches

Biggs’ model, talks of 3P’s: Presage (predispositions that are learning related such as prior knowledge, abilities, values & expectations), Process (learner characteristics and teaching context elements) and Product (qualitative differences in learning outcomes). Of particular interest to the goal of this essay is the process part of the model as “The approach that students use to process academic tasks is referred to as the ‘process’ phase in Biggs’ 3-p Model. The student and teaching contexts when combined, will produce a particular approach to learning which is “broadly conceptualized as either ‘deep’ or ‘surface’... A ‘deep’ approach is indicated by an intention to understand the material to be learnt, using strategies such as reading widely, combining a variety of resources, discussion, reflection, relating parts to a whole, and applying knowledge in real world situations.”¹³ A ‘deep’ approach is indicated by an intention to understand the material to be learnt whereas a ‘surface’ approach is motivated by fear of failure and involves activities that effectively precede understanding, through rote memorisation techniques that precede understanding.

In terms of classroom norms and research “overall, the findings tend to indicate more frequent use of both the surface and deep approaches by the international students... when compared to local Australian students”.¹⁴ This finding dispels the traditional perception of Asian students as predominantly surface learners. That the traditional view is wrong is hardly surprising, but what is surprising is that “the findings suggest that the two constructs of ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ may not be mutually exclusive.”¹⁴ Understanding student’s intentions this way, (as a combination of specific learner and context specific characteristics) is

very useful because “it is more important to consider the learning context and the learners’ intentions which will, in turn, influence the learning strategies to be used”.¹⁴ Once which learning strategies are being used is understood, EAP content can then be presented in a manner in keeping with those strategies, as outlined below.

4. Discourse Positioning and Functional Grammar

The best way to make ‘positioning’ tangible is by physically identifying it in a text through the use of functional grammar, and its concepts of ‘social distance’ and ‘authorial presence’.

4.1. Social Distance

Social distance is a reflection of how well the participants know each other and whether they speak familiarly or distantly. Observable in the use of pronouns “It can be stretched by exclusive we or minimised by inclusive we, and can be stretched by negative judgements and minimised by the solidarity of positive judgements.”¹⁵

4.2. Pronoun use and Authorial Presence

Functional grammar also reveals that “pronouns are said to help the writer organize the text and guide the reader through the argument... By moving between inclusive and exclusive pronouns, writers can help to create a sense of newsworthiness and novelty about their prose, showing how they are plugging disciplinary knowledge gaps”¹⁶ which suggests pronoun functions are related to authorial presence. Making EAP students aware of these functional grammar features in text, both constructively and de-constructively is the first step in building awareness of how positions are established in essays.

4.3. Evaluating Discourse Competence

One hurdle in these activities is that “there are considerable interdisciplinary variations in genres, text structures, professorial expectations, amounts of required writing, and typical types of writing assignment...”¹⁷ students need to understand that academic writing is a meaning-making process rather than merely the externalization of what is already known. Here is the chance for the teacher to really shine as “the teacher as an experienced member of the community of practice provides the apprentice writers (i.e. the students) with ample scaffolding and assistance in the form of conferencing, focused written feedback,

demonstration, explanation, and reformulation of student writing”⁴. Through being familiarised with the functionality of pronoun use, and direct evaluation of their writing using the descriptors to analyse what each part of their text is achieving, students can gain a holistic sense of what stances really are and why they are so essential to productive essay composition.

5. Positioning, Critical Literacy and the Adoption of New Learning Strategies

Through the application of descriptors to the student’s own writing a critical literacy orientation begins to occur as “Understanding how texts position their audience and promote, or make invisible, particular points of view enables students to evaluate the texts of others and to experiment with revealing and challenging different meanings and world views in their own texts... Once these text patterns are made explicit, and their functions and purposes revealed, teachers and students are able to reflect consciously on the kinds of meanings and values which are expressed in these patterns. They are then in a position to choose whether they wish to conform to or change these meanings and, if so, how and in what contexts.”¹⁵ Through this awareness independent learner possibilities emerge.

Now that they understand why stances are so essential to productive essays and that there is no right or wrong positioning, just poorly or well-realised positioning, “students can be given portable knowledge about patterns of English they can apply strategically to a range of contexts of situation, rather than a set of arbitrary rules which may or may not be effective as contexts change”.¹⁵ They also have some idea of what sorts of questions certain disciplines expect them to be asking through genre awareness and analysis. Through personalised feedback (from applied academic descriptors, see McCabe, A, Genis, M Neff et. al, 2008)¹⁸ and a critical orientation, the adoption of new strategies starts to make sense, for Teacher and student alike.

As explained in the article entitled ‘The question of Academic descriptors for writing: a critical view’ “These criteria enabled the instructors to avoid solely focusing on the elimination of student errors and instead, to concentrate, more reasonably, on feasible advancement in discourse competency. Consequently, the students benefited from a detailed list of features which they could learn... so that they could understand what was expected of them and what the instructors meant by effective argumentation (claims, data, conclusion) and appropriate authorial voice (engagement and stance)”¹⁸ When students feel confident in answering these questions for themselves EAP has done its job.

6. Conclusion

To teach positioning in an essay you are asking students to adopt a position to an issue and express it to an audience with academic expectations. In order to do this meaningfully, the teacher first needs to understand the specifics of their own educational context which in turn shines light on learner intentions. Only then can discourse analysis and lecturer expectations be constructively fomented into learner strategy.

Adoption of these strategies then, demands their personalisation through a growing critical literacy. If the strategies are really ever going to be incorporated into that process of adaptation that is a person’s first time learning at university, the teacher must put themselves in the shoes of their students (through looking at the research and needs analysis) before they can clearly articulate the influence of perspective on written English, in a way that students grasp. Especially in the commonly occurring scenario of different cultures in the classroom, students need not only to grasp a perspective but to be able to deconstruct and reconstruct it, especially when it is their own academic voice.

Once issues of student equity are addressed through classroom enculturation into local, national and global community memberships, the students as a whole will get the most out of the classroom experience. But on the individual level, it is not just the grammatical and rhetorical mechanisms but the processes, activities and social associations that lie underneath those mechanisms that put independent possibilities into Discourse. This essay has discussed how creating an appropriately global learning environment, understanding learners intentions and focusing on discourse competence and critical literacy can positively affect the adoption of new learning strategies.

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