

International students' experience of an internal pathway to postgraduate study: Recognising and applying writing strategies to their discipline specific work

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Abstract

International students comprise 76% of the coursework postgraduate cohort in the Faculty of Business at the University of Tasmania. The traditional pathway for students whose first language is not English has been to have an IELTS score of 6. However, we also have an internal entry pathway via DEAP (Direct Entry Academic Program) for international students, which is taught in the English Language Centre. This programme has grown in size and popularity and in November 2008 there were 138 students in 9 DEAP classes. While there has been research into the effects of intensive IELTS preparation classes, and investigations of other EAP courses, as yet there has been no published data about the outcomes for the DEAP students. This study aimed to have ex-DEAP students identify effective writing strategies and to evaluate whether they used those strategies effectively and consistently when tackling writing tasks in their discipline.

Introduction: A changing landscape

Initially, as participants in the Direct Entry Academic Program (DEAP), the students are laying a foundation for academic literacy, with the focus of instruction being on language skills. Irrespective of background or experience, they are grouped in small classes wholly comprised of fellow international students, and taught by a small group of teachers. They have moved from employment or advanced study back to the basics of language and skill acquisition. Once they successfully complete the course and gain admission to their discipline specific course, the ground shifts again. Now they are part of a much larger cohort, comprising local and international students. Their courses of study are subdivided into subjects that are often very different from each other and are taught by a range of lecturers with a variety of styles and expectations. Those students who enrol in postgraduate coursework programmes are also moving towards becoming professional practitioners in their field, and then often into employment in Australia. This process of positioning themselves in relation to their

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learning, to the university, to the culture and towards the audiences for whom they write, is a dynamic and complex one.

Background

We know some things about how international students tackle writing and the difficulties that they face. For example, Paltridge (2004) has provided a concise and thorough review of writing requirements at undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study, described how writing is taught and how the various approaches have developed and also discussed assessment. Silva (1993) has investigated the distinct features of L2 writing and the practical implications. Hirsh (2007) has explored issues to do with the admission processes for international students and thus begun to identify ways to provide the most effective programmes of support. Storch and Hill (2008) have examined the factors which lead to an improvement in English language proficiency after one semester at an Australian university.

We also know some things about the predictive value of IELTS scores due to the work of Dooey (1999), Woodrow (2006), and Ingram and Bayliss (2007). We have been alerted to the limitations of generic skills courses by Leki and Carson (1997) and the positive attributes of content based EAP programmes by James (2006) and Baik and Greig (2009). We also have an investigation of the coping strategies of five ESL students at an American university (Leki, 1995) and a study of both faculty responses and those of 325 ESL students also at an American university by Zamel (1995). Goode (2007) has investigated the construction of what it means to be an independent learner among eight staff and 20 PhD students in a postgraduate course in a British university. Buckingham (2008) has examined the development of academic writing competence in English among a group of 25 Turkish academics and Spack (1997) conducted a longitudinal study (three years) of a Japanese student in an American university as she acquired academic literacy in English.

The study

The study that I undertook uses a set of five categories to identify the strategies which students were taught in their intensive language course (DEAP) and attempts to find out which of these strategies were seen as useful and which were actually used by the students when they tackled writing tasks in their discipline specific courses.

Almost all of the international postgraduate students in the Faculty of Business are doing coursework masters. Almost half (47% in 2009) of our postgraduate coursework cohort comes to us after completing the DEAP which is a 10/15 week course run by the English Language Centre (ELC). The entrance requirements for the ten week DEAP are an IELTS score of 5.5, with no band below 5.5 and for the fifteen week DEAP, a score of 5.5, with no band below 5. Since the DEAP provides so many of our students, and we have no data to track their progress, this pilot research project was undertaken. It was important for us to know how effective the DEAP had been from a student perspective.

In Semester 1, 2009, ex-DEAP students represented 14.1% of the students who came to see me for individual or group assistance with their writing within the Faculty of Business. My position exists solely to provide academic support to postgraduate students within the faculty. I emailed fourteen students who had completed a DEAP course and subsequently enrolled in postgraduate courses in Business and who had been to see me for individual consultations about their writing; four expressed a willingness to undertake to fill out a questionnaire and to take part in a follow up interview. The follow up interviews were taped (using an MP3 player). The Director of Studies (DOS) in the English Language Centre and the DEAP coordinator were also interviewed and recorded in order to ensure that I understood how the programme was running and what kind of texts the students were asked to write. I also obtained a copy of the text book which all DEAP students use and examined that in the light of the questions I asked about writing. The four participants are all female and all Chinese and are all currently postgraduate students in the Faculty of Business. For reasons of confidentiality I will refer to them as Nancy, Cherie, Lucy and Jane, although these are not their names.

The questionnaire and follow up semi structured interview were adapted from the work of Congjun Mu, whose PhD thesis was published as *Second language writing strategies: A study of three Chinese post-graduate students* (2007). She was interested to explore the issue of the transfer of Chinese writing strategies into English writing, as well as documenting the strategies students reported using. My objective was much more modest and circumscribed. The 100 item questionnaire, which Mu used, was in turn adapted from a longer one designed by Victori (1995). I further adapted the questionnaire to suit the purposes of this enquiry. The follow up interview was intended to enable me to find out some background for each participant and to provide the opportunity to clarify the brief responses to the questionnaire. Participants were given a 5 part numeric scale to respond to the questions, from (1) I strongly disagree to (5) I strongly agree.

The classification of the writing strategies (see Table 1) into rhetorical, metacognitive, cognitive, communicative and social/affective categories was based on Mu's new and tentative theory. Her theory is in turn based on a combination of an understanding of the theories of contrastive rhetoric, cognitive development, communication and social constructionism (Mu, 2007, p. 26). The taxonomy of 17 micro-strategies for writing (see Table 1), which I have used, is also her work.

Table 1. *The taxonomy of ESL writing strategies* (Mu, 2005, as cited in Mu, 2007, p.107)

Macro-strategies	Micro-strategies
Rhetorical	O organisation ULI use of first language C coherence
Metacognitive	P planning E evaluation M monitoring

Cognitive	GI generating ideas B borrowing Ret retrieval Cl clarification SA sense of audience Rev revision
Communicative	Av avoidance Red reduction
Social/Affective	Co cooperation Res resourcing RA reducing anxiety

The problem

While we have mechanisms in place to evaluate units of work and the teaching of those units, we lack instruments with which to evaluate student learning strategies, particularly the transfer of those strategies from intensive language courses to their discipline-specific courses. We know that language learning continues, and this study, albeit with a small group of participants, was one way to gain some understanding of how some students manage their language learning in a discipline specific context. These students are a small sample, but they are representative of the international student cohort. From their experiences, teachers and language advisers can gain some insights which will inform our teaching practice.

Rhetorical strategies

The students agreed that organisation was important in writing, particularly when producing content rich work, but it posed significant difficulties. One of those difficulties was the lack of sufficient flexibility to be able to express thoughts with precision. Often students used their L1 to express an idea when they could not find an equivalent in English. This created the additional problem of having to go back to translate. Jane eschewed the use of direct translation from her L1. She said that she realised that the Chinese pattern of thinking is different and the use of proverbs or as she calls them, “sentences from history”, make exact translations impossible. Confidence in one’s ability to write well in the L1 did not flow over into writing in English, and at least one student said that her writing in English was better than her writing in the L1.

Metacognitive strategies

All four students agreed that they had been taught to plan their writing and that they recognised it as being important. Lucy and Nancy made a particular point of explaining that they spent a lot of time analysing the question/topic, which most lecturers, who refer students to me, often mention as a strategy which students do not employ enough. Lucy also particularly mentioned reading widely as a strategy to

improve her writing. When it came to evaluation of their writing, the students were clearly ambivalent about spending precious time on surface errors, compared with time spent on the meaning and structure.

Cherie keeps a list of the errors she has made in the past and checks her work to eliminate such errors. But she was quite clear that “I don’t quite care about grammar and spelling.” When asked to expand on this she explained that the content is the more important feature and corrections can be done later: “It does not matter to me if there are lots of mistakes in my writing as long as people understand what I am saying.”

Lucy and Nancy both maintained that they had learned a lot about writing in the last year and Lucy had confirmed this to her own satisfaction by taking another IELTS test and seeing her band score improve by 0.5. Jane also made a point of the need to recognise different demands depending on the subjects being studied. Writing a law paper demanded different skills from other business subjects. The students’ recognition that particular disciplines required a particular approach to writing can encourage us, as language teachers, to examine again the value of teaching students more explicitly to analyse texts and identify these particularities of genre.

Cognitive strategies

All four students mentioned brain storming and mind mapping as strategies to generate ideas, and talked about experience and imagination being important, although Cherie pointed out that imagination is rarely required in business writing, which relies more on factual input. The importance of the relationship with the reader was acknowledged by all participants. Lucy pointed out that different lecturers had different expectations of written work and that it was important to follow their individual advice. When writing in English she claimed that she felt more responsibility for the reader and hence “I must write simply”, whereas in Chinese, she has confidence that the reader will understand her. Jane recognised the writer’s responsibility in English “to do the hard work”, and to make things clear for the reader. For this reason, she preferred reading the Bible in English, because the writing was so explicit. Nancy also accepted that the writer should assume responsibility for the reader’s understanding of the text, a point which is supported by the DEAP text book: “Essays are not mystery stories, in which the reader waits until the end to find out what it has all been about” (Summers & Smith, 2006, p. 70). This seems to me to be a crucial point which teachers/advisers could make more explicit in their instruction. Cognitive strategies, such as summarising and paraphrasing for example are vital to many of the writing tasks which the students undertake, and can be modelled and taught. An awareness of the audience, and the need to provide signals or links for the reader to follow, are also vital to good academic writing style, and again it is possible to instruct students how to do this, particularly by examining well written texts.

Both Nancy and Jane demonstrated quite a sophisticated understanding of the writing process in that, while recognising the general forward movement towards

resolution/conclusion, there is also a recursive, repetitive aspect to academic writing. Silva (1990, p. 15) says "...writing is a complex, recursive and creative process or set of behaviours that is very similar in its broad outlines for first and second language writers." Jane made the point in her interview that if she just wrote a 'linear' essay, she might pass, but if she wanted a higher mark she needed to write in a 'circular way' and 'go deeper' into things, since ideas were the most important thing when writing.

While the students recognised the value of drafting work and revising it, they also admitted that they often did not do this, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they ran out of time and simply submitted work which they had not read through. In the same vein, they supported the idea of leaving a piece of work for a couple of days and then coming back to it in order to revise it. However, they rarely did this in practice. Another reason, apart from shortage of time, was the risk of confusion. Once they began the revision process they ran the risk of becoming more confused about the purpose of the paper and the students wanted to avoid this. Even if they did produce more than one draft of a paper, the students were not clear about whether the first and the final draft were substantially different or not. Perhaps they were also unsure as to whether the drafts should be substantially different. This is also an important point for teachers to follow up on because editing and revision skills can be taught and students can become more adept at self editing their work.

Communicative strategies

The questions asked in this area attempted to discover the strategies students used when they confronted obstacles to expressing themselves. The students recognised that sometimes they over used certain words and used a thesaurus to find a substitute word or wrote in their L1 and went back later to translate. Lack of a sufficient vocabulary to express ideas and opinions was a common problem. Sometimes these students simplified a complex idea because they could not find an acceptable way of expressing it and this was frustrating. While one of the four students had maintained a disciplined regime of vocabulary acquisition the others had largely given up, despite the fact that they all acknowledged the benefits of using the Academic Word List as part of their course in DEAP. Explicit encouragement to continue to acquire vocabulary would benefit students, as would some explicit teaching of vocabulary.

Social/affective strategies

For these students, asking a classmate rather than the lecturer for clarification was the preferred strategy. This changed over time, and Lucy commented that after a semester, she felt more comfortable asking the lecturer for assistance. These students did rely on their classmates for support and encouragement although sometimes this could lead to a spread of inaccurate information. It was rare for these students to ask local students for information, partly due to the concentration of international students in Business subjects. Some students had contact with locals through church or sport and this provided both social and academic support for them. Our postgraduate coursework

programmes are of short duration, so there is little opportunity to speak to past students, although the faculty has been pleasantly surprised by the willingness of students to volunteer support in particular units when asked via email. However, this support seems limited to content and none of these students asked peers to read their work to provide feedback on language. It is quite possible that this is also the case for local students too. This underlines the continued value of the feedback which advisors can provide to all students, not just international ones.

Summing up and future work

Two of these students were progressing well, one was struggling and the other had renegotiated her major in response to an intervention strategy from the faculty, due to her poor academic progress.

Only one student specifically agreed that she had learned to write during the DEAP, but when interviewed, all four students attested to the value of the course. At least one of them (Jane) was aware of the shortcomings, which attend all such courses. They run for a relatively short period of time and while every effort is made to provide realistic texts and practice, it is still a skills programme as distinct from an authentic writing experience which students confront once they are enrolled in their disciplines (James, 2006; Leki & Carson, 1997). And of course, the particular demands of individual subjects, such as business law, had to be negotiated.

The items on which all four students agreed were in the rhetorical and metacognitive categories. The need and value of planning and organising writing was supported in the text book (Summers & Smith, 2006, p. 69), as was the value of clarifying your ideas and having a main idea to write about (p. 70). Varied sentence lengths and the importance of reading were also stressed in the textbook (p. 71). However, as these unanimously held views only constituted one quarter and one fifth of the items in the respective categories and, given the small sample size, it is not possible to draw any generalised conclusions. It was apparent that students adapted and developed their writing strategies based on experience and the demands of the particular subjects and lecturers. This is supported by the research. Volet (1999, p. 634) summarises several studies which indicated that:

...most CHC (Confucian Heritage Culture) students did anticipate on their arrival in Australia that what was expected of a good student at high school 'back home' was likely to be different in the Australian university context. Students were prepared for change and their expectations about study at university in Australia were found to be quite accurate.

Wong's survey of Asian international students in an Australian university (2004, p.165) also concluded that his research finding "seems to support those of Biggs (1996) and Volet and Renshaw (1996), that Chinese learners are highly adaptive for learning." Of course, the extent to which they did this successfully depended on more than the

training that they had received in DEAP (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Watkins, 2000; Wong & Wen, 2001; Woodrow, 2006).

The interviews with these four students have indicated that they have accepted the need to adapt, with varying degrees of success. However, these changes and adaptations to the shifting terrain of academic study depend on their personal resources and the appropriate application of effective strategies. As Holmes (2004, p. 303) characterises it, “the onus is on these Chinese students to reconstruct and renegotiate their primary culture learning and communication styles to accommodate another way.” In this process of reconstruction and accommodation these students often found themselves in unfamiliar territory. Sometimes they used the strategies which had been taught to them in the DEAP, but at other times the exigencies of time pressure, cultural unfamiliarity and lack of confidence undermined their position. A follow up to this brief snapshot of DEAP students would be a detailed, longitudinal study of a DEAP cohort to further unravel the strategies which enhance student learning about writing. Such a study, which investigated the teaching and learning in more detail could provide data which could be used as evidence to support closer alignment between the language skills being taught in DEAP and the assessment tasks required in the coursework masters degree in the Faculty of Business.

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