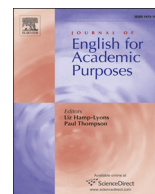




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Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap



Learning to argue in EAP: Evaluating a curriculum innovation from the inside



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 February 2015

Received in revised form 20 December 2015

Accepted 31 December 2015

Available online 29 January 2016

Keywords:

Academic writing

Argumentation

Redrafting

Pedagogic models

Learning opportunities

Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Following Stenhouse's view that evaluation should serve 'curriculum betterment' (1975), this article reports on an action research project which evaluated a pedagogic model for EAP at a UK university: the 'oral presentation sandwich' was a curriculum innovation aimed at developing L2 students' argumentation through a process writing approach. The innovation introduced an oral presentation between the first and second drafts. The evaluation drew on Crabbe's construct of quality in ELT which views learning opportunities from theoretical, cultural, and management perspectives (2003). Data from student questionnaires, a student focus group, interviews with lecturers, notes from staff meetings, and an ethnographic case study of one student's experience of the model were triangulated and the learning opportunities it presented were examined. Findings reveal that the students' take-up of learning opportunities did not match those intended in the design, suggesting a lack of congruence between students' and lecturers' value systems: first, while lecturers viewed the oral presentation as a vehicle for developing argumentation, students viewed it as a performance-based assessment; second, while lecturers focussed on argumentation in feedback on drafts, students focussed on accuracy in their revisions. I propose changes to the model, and discuss implications for teaching argumentation, developing EAP and course design.

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1. Introduction

Teacher: yes?

Student: yeah.....ah maybe.....ehI should say about the...

I just said about the parents' social class (laughs) but even I cannot

understandyeah...ehm..you asked me about the evidence..why

they came from the working class, so eh this part is quite relate with

this because I tryto explain about the...(laughs) ...long day

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2015.12.005>

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Teacher: (laughs) yeah

The excerpt above is taken from a short tutorial on a credit-bearing EAP course at a UK university. The teacher is giving formative feedback on a student's draft, which carries a mark and is thus high stakes. The student's response, characterised by pauses and shifts of topic, suggests a mental juggling act which eventually breaks down into laughter, a situation familiar to many a teacher trying to lead a student to develop the role of evidence in their argumentation. Sung-Wook is one of 180 students taking the course; 11 groups of 16 are taught by six teachers. The teacher has 5 min per student in which to discuss her written feedback on the draft. Sung-Wook will then develop the argument in an oral presentation, and, in response to lecturer feedback and questions from peers, write a final draft. This model, known as the oral presentation sandwich (OPS), is a curriculum innovation which was introduced at the university. By focussing on the textual practices needed to produce academic writing (AW) which is linguistically correct and culturally appropriate, (critical reading, drafting, editing), the EAP courses aim to build up the 'powers of informed and independent reasoning' required of graduates (Nesi & Gardner, 2012:89). Here, learning to argue is key. The innovation aimed to address a specific problem which the EAP team had identified: students' revisions of drafts typically failed to develop argumentation, but focussed on local rather than global features.

In what follows, I tell the story of how the EAP team conceived, piloted and evaluated the OPS through an action research project (my role comprised project leader, EAP subject leader and teacher). The intention was to develop evidence-based practice, as well as reflection at team level. Through documentation of the processes and discussion of the findings, we came to appreciate the force of Broadfoot's warning that curriculum innovations cannot be assumed to 'work in the way intended' (2002:288). In the following section, I contextualise the OPS by reviewing the literature on language programme evaluation, the role of argumentation in AW, and pedagogical models devised to develop this.

2. Literature review

2.1. Evaluating pedagogic models for EAP

Building on Broadfoot above, the success of any curriculum innovation depends on the interplay of contextual factors which can only be identified through systematic evaluation of its application. Language programme evaluation, initially concerned with measurement of outcomes through psychometric approaches by outsiders, has gradually shifted to 'scrutiny of classroom practices' from the inside (Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005:57). Here Stenhouse's vision of evaluation as a tool for developing curriculum and pedagogical practice has been seminal: 'Evaluation should, as it were lead to development and be integrated with it. Then, the conceptual distinction between development and evaluation is destroyed and the two merge as research.' (1975:122).

However, as Crabbe (2003) and Kiely and Rea-Dickins (2005) note, in ELT, insider evaluation remains relatively rare. Crabbe (2003) sets out a useful framework for this context, which draws on Lave and Wenger's notion of 'community of practice' (1991), foregrounding quality and learning opportunities: the curriculum, viewed as a series of learning opportunities which will lead to specific outcomes, is 'brought to life by the teachers and students and is governed by their beliefs and values', (2003:10). Course designers need to ensure that learning opportunities are, first, made available through specific activities such as collaborative learning, scaffolding and feedback, and, second, that they match students' perceived needs. The quality of any programme, then, depends on not only a valid design but also on implementation and successful outcomes. Accordingly, Crabbe puts forward three levels of enquiry for English language program evaluation: theoretical (learning opportunities), cultural (values and roles) and management (operationalising/achieving quality).

Crabbe's framework fits well with the social constructivist view of EAP adopted in this paper, which sees students as novices undergoing socialisation into the culturally appropriate texts of their host academic communities, a process requiring considerable adaptation (Salter-Dvorak, 2014). As Nesi and Gardner point out, university students are required not only to develop knowledge through writing, but also to display this 'in accordance with the expectations of the discipline' (2012:26). A key notion here is that of genre, defined by Hyland as 'a term for grouping texts together, representing how writers typically respond to recurring situations' (2008:544), and by Nesi and Gardner as 'not the written texts themselves, but conventional ways of doing things realised through the written texts' (2012:24). Genres, pragmatists in EAP argue, need to be made explicit in writing pedagogies (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2008; Nesi & Gardner, 2012). As novice writers cannot see AW being done (Salter-Dvorak, 2014) socialisation into 'conventional ways of doing things' is dependent on appropriate feedback. In EAP, learner-centred approaches from the process writing movement have led to increased use of formative feedback (which feeds forward to future revisions) prior to summative feedback (which justifies the marker's assessment of the level achieved). These approaches draw on sociocultural theory, which views cognition as a social phenomenon (Vygotsky, 1978), in which scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976, cited in Weissberg, 2006:247) and interaction between teachers, writers and peers can enable novice writers to progress from 'current to potential performance' (Hyland, 2008:559). It is the quality of the feedback, then, that is key in enabling socialisation into genres.

As the EAP courses described above cater for large numbers, assignments need to be organised well in advance and marked to tight deadlines. While discourses of good practice advocate piloting and evaluation of assessment models, the reality is that, due to logistical constraints, assignments in this context are often selected for reasons of expediency. A key challenge facing EAP teachers, then, is that of devising pedagogical models which optimise the role of formative feedback to enable written texts which are both linguistically correct and culturally appropriate, as outlined below.

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