

The impact of an EAP course on postgraduate writing

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Abstract

This study assessed the impact of completing an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course on the writing of postgraduate¹ learners. We begin this paper by describing a course offered for credit to postgraduate international students at a university in Australia, and then report on a large-scale study ($n = 69$) which investigated the improvement (if any) in the writing of students enrolled in this course. The students undertook the course at the beginning of their postgraduate studies at the university and concurrently with their degree programs. Two cohorts were identified: students with an IELTS score on entry to the University of 6.0 (or equivalent) and those with a score of 6.5. Data for the study were the in-class writing produced by the students at the beginning and at the end of semester, and a short questionnaire. The students' texts were analysed using a range of measures for fluency, linguistic accuracy and use of academic vocabulary. Texts were also analysed for overall structure, cohesion and coherence. The study found improvements for the entire group and for the two cohorts mainly in terms of accuracy, use of academic vocabulary, and structure. We discuss these findings in relation to key pedagogical features of the course.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of international students in Australian universities, reflecting a trend observed in many other universities in English-speaking countries. For most of these international students, English is their second language, and in 2007, 44% were postgraduates (Studies in Australia, 2007). Given the large number of international students, there has been an increased awareness of the difficulties these students face when studying in their second language. In response to these perceived difficulties, Australian universities have established a range of ESL programs (see Melles, Millar, Morton, & Fegan, 2005). At the University of Melbourne these programs include individual tutorials, workshops and credit-bearing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses.

Many universities have also developed EAP courses specifically designed for postgraduate students (e.g. Cargill, Cadman, & McGowan, 2001; see also list in Melles et al., 2005), in recognition of the difference in tasks and skills required of postgraduate compared to undergraduate students. These courses, on the whole, aim to develop the

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¹ The Australian term 'postgraduate student' corresponds to the US 'graduate student'. Both terms are used interchangeably in this article.

learners' writing skills, including development of more sophisticated and accurate levels of academic language use. A number of published papers provide a descriptive account of different courses and approaches adopted (e.g. Cargill et al., 2001; Casanave, 2003; Dudley-Evans, 1995; Frodesen, 1995; Silva, Reichelt, & Lax-Farr, 1994). However, to date there has been little research which has attempted to systematically assess the impact these programs and courses have had on the students' academic writing.

This study investigated the impact that a credit-bearing EAP course, developed specifically for international postgraduate students and titled Presenting Academic Discourse (PAD), had on the students' writing. The paper begins with a description of the EAP course and the rationale for the instructional approach adopted and then proceeds to outline the study, including the research questions that guided the study.

2. Presenting Academic Discourse (PAD)

This course aims to develop the advanced language and academic skills required for successful postgraduate study in English. The skills focused on include effective research skills, critical reading and writing, the ability to plan and confidently give an oral presentation on a research topic, and the ability to write a research proposal (which includes a review of the literature) fluently, accurately and using appropriate academic language.

The teaching approach adopted is best described as task-based (Skehan, 2003). The assessment tasks form the organising principle of the syllabus, and include:

- a summary of one text (500 words),
- a critical summary comparing two texts (1000 words),
- a proposal for a research project (2500–3000 words), and
- an oral seminar presentation based on the proposal (7–10 minutes long).

These tasks were chosen because they have been identified as authentic tasks required of postgraduate students, particularly in terms of the writing and critical engagement expected of graduate students (Belcher, 1995; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Hood, 2008). The approach is also student-centred. Students choose topics for their assignments which are directly related to their interests and study areas, and are encouraged to sustain the same topic throughout the assessment tasks so as to build cumulatively towards an extended understanding of an issue.

The course draws on the work of a number of scholars on composing processes (e.g. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Tribble, 1996), on genre approaches to the teaching of academic writing (e.g. Cheng, 2008; Hyland, 2004, 2007), and research showing the importance of feedback and revision to the composing processes, particularly for the development of graduate literacy (Leki, 2006). For each major assessment task students write a first draft for review by the instructor, after which the final version is submitted. The first draft is annotated by the students (see Storch & Tapper, 1997) which enables the students to articulate their concerns. Feedback is given mainly on structure and language. Since the EAP instructors are not discipline specialists, they give content feedback only if the claims lack clarity or are insufficiently developed. Only the final draft is graded. Common errors in our students' writing are often discussed in class (e.g. errors in use of articles in generic statements or inappropriate adverb/verb collocations), with examples taken from the students' writing and suggested reformulations elicited from the students or provided by the teacher.

The course is one semester long (12 weeks), with class time comprising two seminars (of 1 ½ hours each) per week. In the seminars, activities focus on text analysis and various language exercises. Model texts are analysed for structure and language use and then students are asked to analyse texts from their own disciplines (see Hood, 2005; Swales & Feak, 2000, 2004). For example, in teaching students how to write a critical review, students are presented with an authentic review and asked to analyse it for content (i.e. what aspects of the study are critiqued), how the review is structured, and the language used in the review (e.g. verbs of attribution, use of unreal conditional, phrases used to evaluate a study). Students are then asked to analyse and report to class on a review from their own discipline-specific area of study (see Casanave, 2003; Hirvella, 2004; Hyland, 2007).

A range of exercises is used to draw learners' attention to linguistic choices (lexical and grammatical) and form-meaning links. For example, students are asked to summarise a short text in groups; we then look at different versions produced in class, and subsequently at a model produced by the teacher. Grammatical and lexical choices are discussed with a focus on what is considered an appropriate formal, academic register, changing trends in academic writing, similarities and differences in discipline-specific writing and conventions (e.g. in the use of passive voice, first

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