How reflective exchanges of second language students can have an impact on their learning outcomes and on future curriculum planning in a tertiary environment.

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ABSTRACT: Teaching academic English and study skills at tertiary level can be a restricted and pressured environment due to factors such as heavy course content, large numbers of students or lack of time to teach all areas that are needed. Situations like this often mean there is little opportunity for students to voice personal opinions on the content and method of how they are being taught in ESL oriented papers or their mainstream majors. It also means limited chances for them to articulate and share personal learning experiences and cultural backgrounds to allow them to extend their knowledge of their present situations. This paper describes how giving students time for reflection on these areas in an undergraduate second language academic discourse paper allowed them to contemplate learning and studying strategies for this and other papers they were engaged with. The outcomes for them included an increase in confidence to express themselves to their peers, a realisation that their previous learning and cultural backgrounds had value and use to their New Zealand experiences and a greater understanding of some basic tertiary processes. Web conferencing was used to support their reflection process. The results of these reflective exchanges for the tutor has had an impact on current and future curriculum design and led to the compiling of a list of simple but important factors that could of be of use to the wider tertiary community in their teaching of non-English speaking background students.

KEYWORDS: Academic English, English as a Second Language, Reflection, Reflective Prompts, Web Conferencing.

Introduction

In our university department, we currently offer four undergraduate papers in English as a Second Language, two at level one, and two at level two. In the design of our papers we are guided by a socio-cultural perspective. A socio-cultural approach emphasizes that the entire learning environment should be focused on the context of learning, rather than on individual learners (Wertsch, 1998; Lantolf, 2000). Thus we structure our papers around a variety of methods that allows us to gauge the learning of the students as well as introduce them to particular learning styles needed for the New Zealand context. In particular our use of a web conferencing allows us to extend student learning environments by providing areas for interaction around material being studied and by providing private areas for students to externalize inner speech. Thus the web conference has become an affordance for each of the courses, a tool that provides extra occasions for learning and creates a mediating space for students to reflect, interact and note private thought. It creates a window that allows us and the students to view the learning environment and learning experiences they are going through. The underlying principle being that giving students many opportunities to

interact with each other, texts, ideas and thoughts raises their awareness that their learning is focused on a wider audience than themselves.

The course

The course that this paper focuses on is a level two paper called Academic Oral Discourse which has as its central purpose the aim of instructing students in the ability to discuss and question academic texts with a view to participating in seminar and tutorial discussions. Integral to these aims is practice in intensive reading and enquiry of academic texts with a view to students understanding academic written work, learning to voice opinions, question views, and engage those around them in discussions designed to raise awareness in academic settings. An underlying aim of the course is to also help students merge their previous learning experiences and cultural backgrounds with their current learning situation here by helping them to consciously organize, control and evaluate experiences (van Lier, 1996). The purpose being to show them that their implicit knowledge can stimulate explicit language to help them create a basis from which they could join in discussions.

However, this is not an easy task as Ballard & Clanchy (1991) have noted that international students are reluctant to interact with peers and lecturers in tutorial situations because of a variety of factors, including poor English, an inability to think on the spot, the thought that they have nothing to say that is relevant or interesting or that accords with what lecturers and tutors may want. Ward (2001) also notes that international students have difficulties in adjusting to expectations about cultural learning styles, for example group discussions and debates about ideas.

Case Study

The small intrinsic case study undertaken was aimed to help students to begin to reflect critically on their past and present learning experiences in this paper and their others. It was also aimed at having them re-cycle lecture ideas on studying and finally to encourage them to become more confident in their oral interactions with peers in a discussion environment

One of the answers was to employ dialogic private journals built around reflective prompts. These would allow the tutor to manipulate the inner speech of the students in the hope it would allow them to be more critically reflective on academic material and thus lead them to be better prepared, produce more language suitable for classroom discussions and give them more confidence in their dealings with peers and lecturers. They would also allow for insight into the students emotional as well as cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1986).

By creating a zone of proximal development through the web conference where students can practice discussion and debate in written form before having to orally engage others in the classroom environment, we hoped to lessen the cultural pressure and raise the amount of language being acquired.

The participants

Unlike other papers in the ESL programme, there were only six students in the paper. Although the small number of students can be seen as a constraint, in this case it gave time to follow the learning journey of each individual to be easier to follow. The nationalities involved included two Chinese, two Japanese, an Iranian and a student from Laos. Three of the students had completed an undergraduate degree in their home countries. Two of the students were in the final year of their degree here, three of the students were in their third year and one student was in the process of finishing her degree in her home country and was here on an exchange programme for her final semester.

Constraints

Having only six participants was constraining as it allowed for a very limited collection of data. As well, the time available for this type of study was limited to 12 weeks of the course. Because of that I had to be quite directional with the students because as well as trying to help them realize my aims, I also had to ensure that they were processing the curriculum set. Although I wanted them to have relative autonomy they also needed to have direction so there had to be an element of control by me in their private dialogues but I also had to try to not to shape their thoughts too much, to avoid what van Lier (1996, pp. 180-181) perceives as the "dialogue remaining in the control of the teacher". As well a certain amount of the prompts had to reflect the curriculum aims.

Data Collection method

To avoid this the weekly journals were structured around a series of reflective prompts designed to help students question material, organize their thoughts and connect old knowledge to new and in the process enable them to begin to critically reflect not only on the material but to help them make personal sense of what they were reading and the audience they were preparing to speak to (Langer & Applebee, 1987). In this sense, the journals became an area for thinking and for writing down private speech because the students had to converse with themselves around the given prompts. They were directed to question and directed to think about areas in a structured way. In contrast to regular unstructured journal writing, the private speech that was generated was more contextualized and relevant to the whole learning process they were experiencing. The journal therefore became a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) for the students as they were able to mediate their thoughts with relevant material and practice, modify and internalize language ready for future tasks (Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p. 10).

I hoped that these prompts would allow students to be more critically reflective on academic material and thus lead them to be better prepared, produce more language suitable for classroom discussions and give them more confidence in their dealings with peers and lecturers. They would also allow for insight into the students emotional as well as cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1986). They were also designed to allow for practice and rehearsal of ideas and vocabulary for subsequent oral discussions at the beginning of each lecture.

Central to having the students critically think about academic material and ground that thinking in their past and present learning experiences is creating questions that are

thought provoking. These should be designed to allow students to converse with themselves rather than generating simple 'yes'/'no' answers. The questions have to prompt the students to go beyond the surface and to use previous knowledge to test out assumptions and implications and to direct the students to seek clarification and elaboration in exploring ideas and statements (MacKnight, 2000, p. 39). Many of the reflective prompts designed for the dialogic journal had these tenets behind them (See Appendix A for examples of the prompts used).

They responded to the reflective prompts by writing in their private dialogic journals (viewable by the student and instructor only) over a ten-week period. The instructor did not comment on the writing in these journals. However, at the beginning of lectures, the subjects raised through the prompts were used to stimulate a tutorial type discussion. Having allowed the students time to reflect on the prompts and write their thoughts, allowed for practice and rehearsal of ideas and vocabulary and gave them information to re-cycle for these discussions.

Data Analysis

From analyzing the data, in varying degrees, the responses to the first journal entries were either grammatically poor, (See appendix 2 for more examples that coincide with the prompts in appendix 1) for example, student 1:

> *in the past lecture we had discussion questions. first we read themselves after few minute lecture (Mrs lucy)said we should discussed about this question with other student was good we share our ideas and discussed.the main poin was abot asking personal opion. the aother it was about backgroun and culture and geneal knowlege about learing and skill reading, writting and lisening and also abou past experence we had in the lecture and also shared some ideas with each athere and encourageing to involved in the discusstion. increasing personal interst in the topic and make sure remmeber things and develop new ideas.and also we learned about tutorial, seminars and workshops and how different this are ,learn about how this insutation works and how important is aksing quesion and discussing and independen thinking skills sharing the ideas with other and practising seaking and active listening skills and also getting know each othre in the groups and how is important to know our tutore.*

Or too brief, for example, student 2:

> *1) I found the "attitudes and approaches to learning" and "effective reading" have stuck me so much.*

However, as time progressed, the private dialogue of the students became more thoughtful and more structured and more oriented on their past and present learning experiences so that by the end of the course, the students were really expressing in a more cohesive and concerned way their thoughts in relation to the material covered and in a wider socio-cultural manners:

From my point of view, the transcripts do show a willingness to engage with the questions asked, and do show that the students were more comfortable in expressing

an opinion. As well, they began to think more about their current and previous learning experiences and worked these thoughts into their entries. These entries were then triangulated with notes taken during their oral discussions and other course assessments. In all cases it was also clear that the opportunity to review and revise ideas, vocabulary and language from lectures had worked well. In discussions students grew in confidence and were more accurate in their insights in to themes and ideas running through reading texts. They also seemed more prepared and willing to ask questions that caused presenters to have to think about their answers in the light of their culture and learning experiences. Presenters did not seem phased about these types of questions and handled them well with the appropriate amount of thought.

Additional Insights: For the tutor

As well as focusing on their learning, the prompts and subsequent oral discussions revealed aspects that I had to confront, especially about the way the curriculum was ordered. By reading and listening to them, I found that I had covered some skills in an inappropriate order, for example I began with some skills for reading, and many of the students had either never touched on them, or had not done so recently. Therefore, these occupied their minds too much and took them away from other skills that we were covering at the time. I also realised that I should have started with a topic that was familiar to them, like lecture skills and practice, as this would have led them in gently to other areas of the course. I could have started from an easier topic and built up to the more difficult ones. There were also areas they felt they needed more time on, for example skills in question raising and some skills they felt were irrelevant for their needs, such as designing and using OHT's-they all use powerpoint.

Additional insights: Factors for teaching

Some of these are obvious, and in fact have been written about many times, however sometimes just to read about issues is not enough, the situation has to actually happen to you for you to understand that the problems are real and need to be dealt with.

The three main areas here are:

Lectures/tutorial situations:
Ideas that came to light include making them feel welcome to sit at the front. They need to do this because they cannot read, listen and write at the same time. Initially they need to sit at the front to take notes. Then once they realise how to do this, or they realise that they do not need to write everything, they need to be there for their aural skills, to discern dialect, accents and lexical items. They need to be able to watch your mouth to distinguish difficult vocabulary. Finally, they need to understand emphasis, humour and seriousness. They do this by gauging the facial expressions of the lecturers.

Preparation:
For a lecturer or tutor it is important to take time to prepare notes. Serious students attend, they do not use notes as an excuse not to go to lectures, they use them to revise and review areas so that they can make sense of what they are being taught. They place a lot more emphasis on the written word.

It is also important to explain the point of exercises as although they may understand that you want them to do something, they do not understand the context of why. Questions that need to be answered by a tutor or lecturer when compiling exercises include, Where does the particular exercise fit in their learning curve? Why should they do the exercise? What practical help is it?

Group work management:
Working in groups has become quite common, but while it is a useful too for lecturers or tutors, sometimes the usefulness for the students is not conveyed. Time should be taken to explain why group work is being used, as again, they may understand that you want them to do it, but they do not understand its importance for their learning experience. Students can also feel that the use of group work distances them from the lecturer, that it is used instead of instruction. Explanation and reassurance is needed in this area. Problems that arise in group work situations include dealing with personality clashes, assuming roles and reporting on students that do not cooperate. Practices need to be in place to overcome these problems from the beginning, and explanations and help from the lecturer or tutor needs to be forthcoming.

Conclusion

From considering all the written data and their oral reactions in class, I felt that the study had achieved its aim which was to try to enable them to begin to reflect critically on their past and present learning experiences in this paper and their others, to have them re-cycle lecture ideas on studying and to encourage them to become more confident in their oral interactions with peers in a discussion environment

Additionally the insights that I gained into areas that I had not thought about have helped me develop as a teacher of these students and have raised my awareness of extra challenges that they face in my lectures as well as in others.

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Appendix 1

Some Examples of Reflective Prompts

Personal Reflection 1

Over the past week, what ideas that we have covered have stuck in your mind the most?

Can you explain why they have stuck in your mind? Are the things we have covered completely new ideas to you or do they relate to any ideas that you have come across previously? Of the ideas covered, are there any that you are putting into practice in other classes that you are taking?

Have you set any personal goals for this course yet?

Do you have any unanswered questions about the course so far? If you do, please list them.

Personal   Reflection   6

You have all just had your first experience of delivering a mini lecture. Can you explain how you feel about your performance? Is there anything you would do differently?

Do you think you have a little more confidence in being in front of an audience now?

Think back to the lectures you listened to, what sticks in your mind as being important or valuable information and why?

Did you gain fresh insights into studying at university?

Personal   Reflection   10

Go back and consider the goals that you thought of at the beginning of the semester, have you achieved any parts of the goals that you set?

Explain the parts you have achieved or explain why you think you have not achieved any or part of your goals.

If you did not set a goal at the beginning, have you any idea of learning goals for next year?

What changes will you make to your learning techniques after this course?

What has been the biggest benefit to you of this course? Please explain in detail.

Do you think that you are now more culturally aware of the New Zealand way of studying, and are you more aware of the difference between your culture and accepted way of studying? Please make sure that you explain this answer in detail.

Appendix 2

Some Examples of Answers to the Prompts

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3
Entry 1	*Over the past week, what ideas that we have covered have stuck in your mind the most?* *in the past lecture we had discussion questions. first we read themselves after few minute lecture (Mrs lucy)said we should discussed about this question with other student was good we share our ideas and discussed.the main poin was abot asking personal opion. the aother it was about backgroun and culture and geneal knowlege about learing and skill reading, writting and lisening and also abou past experence we had in the lecture and also shared some ideas with each athere and encourageing to involved in the discusstion. increasing personal interst in the topic and make sure remmeber things and develop new ideas.and also we learned about tutorial, seminars and workshops and how different this are ,learn about how this insutation works and*	*Over the past week, what ideas that we have covered have stuck in your mind the most?* *1) I found the "attitudes and approaches to learning" and "effective reading" have stuck me so much.*	*Over the past week, what ideas that we have covered have stuck in your mind the most?* *I have kept in mind that I should be active for learning such as reading and discussion. I am studying at University not high school or not in Japan. As the author mentioned in the textbook, we have to be an aware students. The most important thing is that the effective way of learning is being active. That means I have to think about something more deeply, carefully and be an independent person.*

	how important is aksing quesion and discussing and independen thinking skills sharing the ideas with other and practising seaking and active listening skills and also getting know each othre in the groups and how is important to know our tutore.		
Entry 6	***You have all just had your first experience of delivering a mini lecture. Can you explain how you feel about your performance? Is there anything you would do differently?*** *Generally I think the mini lecture went better than excepted. We had a few issues and difficulties with the organisation of our lecture, which lead to some misunderstandings between Diane and myself. When we arrived in class I felt a bit unhappy at the situation, we had had no practice at all, however it turned out to be all right. I feel we have all gained more confidence and I'm sure I can do better next time. However for future lectures we need more practice.*	***You have all just had your first experience of delivering a mini lecture. Can you explain how you feel about your performance? Is there anything you would do differently?*** *I think our group did it very well as the first presentation for both of us. When we rehearsed the presentation, our performance did not sound all right. We felt it was too embarrassed to speak it out and always ran out of the time. However, I did not feel such a embarrassment at the mini-lecture so I think our preparation worked for reducing our nervousness. One thing which I regret is that we did not let audiences participate our presentation. Also I would practice more about showing power points slides.*	***You have all just had your first experience of delivering a mini lecture. Can you explain how you feel about your performance? Is there anything you would do differently?*** *I think I did not prepare them well. So my mini-lecture was so awful. And before the mini-lecture, we promised to come there early and practice with computer. However, he did not come until the lecture started. So I felt nervous and did not know how to use the power point. We should have done it before 2days of the mini-lecture. And I think I should not remember all sentences because I forgot so easily when I stood the front of audiences. I had better change them into my own words. So, I can speak without prompt cards .*
Entry 10	***What has been the biggest benefit to you of this course? Please explain in detail.*** *My writing, reading and basic concepts of English have improved greatly from this coarse. I am more open and much more confident in my speaking. I am more comfortable in speaking with people now and I can now present information if I need to. I now ask more questions for things that I don't understand. I can openly have discussions*	***Go back and consider the goals that you thought of at the beginning of the semester, have you achieved any parts of the goals that you set? Explain the parts you have achieved or explain why you think you have not achieved any or part of your goals.*** *At the beginning of the semester, I felt strongly that I needed to learn*	***Do you think that you are now more culturally aware of the New Zealand way of studying, and are you more aware of the difference between your culture and accepted way of studying? Please make sure that you explain this answer in detail.*** *I think this is the same as culture because I will realize my culture when I go abroad. With getting information about studying in New Zealand, I compare it with Japanese way of*

with people and not having to worry about my speaking. I know about all the different skills at university and they have helped me immensely in all my other subjects. I also know about critical thinking, I can think and say my thoughts more logically so that my point that I am trying to make gets across to the other person. I also learnt about computer skills and I can now make presentations on PowerPoint and I can use the computer more often and by myself. Over all I have benefited heaps in this course.	*English oral presentation skills. I had never done a presentation until this course and was very scared of it, because I knew that I would be terribly nervous and stressed. Also, I likely became quiet during a tutorial or discussion and was very frustrated with myself. I wanted to change myself.* *I think that I have achieved my first goal, to obtain oral presentation skills. After each presentation, I got the general idea of a good presentation.. I always made some mistakes, but it was also fun because all mistakes became improvements for next presentation. Besides, I found myself becoming less nervous after each one presentation. Moreover, I participated in discussions without any hesitation in the course. Reasons for my confidence could be the size of group and the relaxed atmosphere but I am really pleased that I have become not to embarrass my pronunciation, accent and grammar mistakes when speaking.*	*studying and it is very different from New Zealand way. For example, lecturers do not use power point, OHP slides, and Class Forum in a lecture in Japan. Japanese students do not try to show their thoughts honestly and just follow what lecturers say. Individual works are really emphasized on studying and it made students compete with each other. To make matters worse, they do not learn how to write an academic essay or take notes, a purpose of a lecture. Therefore, I think New Zealand ways of studying is more useful for students than Japanese one. Also, I hope these above things will be changed soon.*