

Teaching writing to students from Asia: Linking approach and motivation

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Abstract

This article is based on a study of the motivation and perceived outcomes of students from non-English speaking backgrounds enrolled in the English for Academic Study program at the Auckland University of Technology. It discusses the implications of the findings for tutors responsible for teaching writing. The findings indicate that that the motivation and immediate needs of those students are mainly instrumental, to write assignments and projects in a university environment, while the long-term goals are to use language in the workplace. For such students, we argue that a writing program will need to cater for generic forms acceptable to academic as well as real (often business) world readership. We also argue that while introducing an element of ideological critique is important when teaching writing, it does not seem to immediately help students with actual use or

application of the genres relevant in real world situations. However, when considering long-term goals, the article looks at how the work of academic literacies thinkers can help alert students to power and ideological aspects of writing. The discussion in this article could also be generalized for the teaching of writing in ESL and EFL contexts.

Introduction

The high number of NESB (Non-English Speaking Background) students (e.g. Asian students) in New Zealand tertiary classrooms in recent years means that tutors and course planners are faced with the need to develop courses that will better reflect the goals of such students.

This article is based on findings of a study on the perceptions of those students, of how they will appropriate the language skills they have learnt to serve their immediate needs and long-term aspirations. Using a framework for examining the issue of motivation and orientation from the literature, it seeks to link course planning with students'

motivations, their immediate needs and long-term goals. It attempts to address the specific question, “What characterises the nature of NESB students’ motivation and outcomes in their learning of academic English?” and discusses possible approaches to planning a writing program focusing on NESB students.

Background of study

Significance of students’ motivation and needs in course design

Course developers usually take into consideration a number of factors, for instance, among them include students’ motivation and needs. In the literature, motivation is a frequently used term to explain the success or failure of language learning achievement. The various views on motivation proposed over the years can be summarized as behavioristic (anticipation of rewards and external forces involved), cognitive (individual’s decisions/choices and internal forces involved) and constructivist (social context and personal choices and interactive forces involved). Brown (2000, p.162), however, notes that motivation

actually belongs to all three schools of thought as the “fulfillment of needs is rewarding, requires choices and in many cases must be interpreted in a social context.”

The relationship between motivation and success in second language learning was studied by Gardner and Lambert (1972). In a later paper, Gardner (1985) notes the significance of motivation as a contributing factor in language learning, whereby motivation is perceived to be composed of three elements: effort (the time spent studying the language and the drive of the learners), desire (how much the learners want to become proficient in the language) and affect (the learner's emotional reactions with regard to language study). Linking motivation and outcomes, Gardner also identifies ‘instrumental’ and ‘integrative’ motivations and ‘linguistic’ and ‘non-linguistic’ outcomes of the language learning experience. The studies of ‘instrumental and integrative’ motivations have been conducted by Gardner and some of his critics (Oller, 1982; Au, 1988; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Dornyei, 2001), who have considered motivation as a key to language learning. They have

examined motivation in terms of the individual's intrinsic and extrinsic motives and often refer to the distinction between integrative and instrumental orientations of the learner. Dornyei (2001) acknowledges the important role of the social dimension of second language motivation as well as the distinction between integrativeness and instrumentality as discussed by Gardner.

Furthermore, by way of the outcomes of language learning, Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) propose that, in both formal and informal learning situations, individual differences generate linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. Linguistic outcomes refer to actual language knowledge and skills and also include course grades and achievement in language proficiency tests, whereas non-linguistic outcomes reflect the attitudes concerning cultural values and beliefs with regard to the target community. In relation to these outcomes, Ellis (1997) suggests that learners who are motivated to integrate both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes will attain a higher degree of language proficiency and more desirable attitudes.

We propose that depending on whether the students' orientations are academic or career related (instrumental) or socially or culturally oriented (integrative), course content will be required to fulfill different language learning demands and to enable the students to achieve their goals. We, therefore, set out to find out 'what characterizes the nature of NESB students' motivation (instrumental or integrative) and outcomes (linguistic or non-linguistic) in their learning of English' in an English for Academic Study (EAS) program.

The Study

Definitions of terms

With regard to terminology, 'instrumental' refers to how language learners eventually find the target language useful, applicable and serving a functional purpose. In our particular situation, such learners will be able to use English to function in subsequent university study as well as at work. The term 'integrative' pertains to how language mastery results in a greater facility of incorporation and assimilation into life in the target society, in our case, New Zealand society.

It should be noted here that the two orientations, instrumental and integrative, are not necessarily mutually exclusive as second language learning is rarely taken up in contexts exclusively instrumental or exclusively integrative. Findings from our study indeed indicate a mixture of each orientation.

Background and participants

The EAS program caters for the needs of NESB students who wish to prepare for university studies. Entry requirements are either an overall Band 5.5 in IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or a pass in the placement test and interview. During this full-time, 16-week program, students build up their academic English through four concurrent modules: Reading and Vocabulary Development, Listening and Note-taking, Oral Interaction and Writing and Research Skills.

The 70 participants in the study are EAS students from China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia, India, the Philippines, Turkey and Lebanon. Predominantly Chinese (46/65%), their ages range from 20

to 40. The older students are migrants with tertiary qualifications or professional training from their home countries whereas the younger are either school-leavers who have been “localized” in that they already have permanent residence in New Zealand, or internationals and exchange students, on student visas. Their English proficiency is at a pre-advanced level.

Genre approach to course design

The present EAS writing program is based on the genre approach as described in Cope and Kalantzis (1993), Callaghan, Knapp and Noble (1993), Paltridge (2000) and Paltridge (2001). It provides input through what is known as the curriculum cycle or wheel model (Callaghan, Knapp and Noble, 1993; Cope and Kalantzis, 1993; Paltridge, 2001) and demonstrated in Toh (2000). The curriculum cycle is based on scaffolding (Paltridge 2001), which involves providing support for students to the point where they are able to perform the writing task, first with help from the teacher and then independently. It can be divided into the following scaffolded stages:

field construction, modelling, joint construction and individual construction.

Field construction is when teacher and students build up enough knowledge about the content. For example, if the students need to write about the wool business in New Zealand, they will have to gather factual or statistical or historical information about the particular business. Modelling is the next stage of the curriculum cycle. The teacher models linguistic and discoursal features (purpose, intended audience, key vocabulary items, typical patterns of grammar, formal vs informal tone) typical of a generic text-type, for example, a business report. Modelling lends itself to meeting the linguistic needs of the students. Some teachers adopting the curriculum cycle who are familiar with Hallidayan functional grammar can choose to use it during modelling (Gerot, 1995). Joint Construction is when teacher and student jointly compose a piece based on what has been modelled and information gathered at the field construction stage. Independent Construction is the final stage when students write their own business report. The curriculum cycle can be used to teach different generic

text-types, for example, expository essays, statistical commentaries, synopses and literature reviews. This is in keeping with our findings about the need for instrumentality. Indeed, the curriculum cycle is repeatable for each generic text-type.

Data collection and analysis

Because of the participants' diverse backgrounds, it was felt that motivation is one of the most important of the variables of their language learning. Research in the area of the students' motivation, their immediate needs and long-term goals was undertaken over two semesters. Ethical approval was gained from the university's Ethics Committee and students were made fully aware of the ethical considerations. Participant Information was given in writing and explained verbally as well. Those willing to participate were given the opportunity to ask for any clarifications before they signed the Participant Consent Forms. They were then asked to write a short reflection on their aspirations and motivations for learning English using the following guidelines:

- their attitudes towards learning English before the EAS course

- their main purpose or purposes for studying English in an English-speaking country
- their reason or reasons for studying for a tertiary qualification in an English-speaking country
- what they would like to gain from the EAS course
- what they think they have gained from the EAS course
- how they would utilize the knowledge they have gained in future

For the analysis, both researchers identified and agreed on key phrases indicating the two aspects of motivation (instrumental and integrative motivation) and outcomes (linguistic and non-linguistic).

In terms of qualitative research methodology, social scientists have used different techniques to uncover themes in texts. Key-phrase analysis involves proof-reading the material and highlighting key phrases which range from word counts to in-depth scrutiny of each phrase or utterance, including key words in context or indigenous categories, word repetitions and analysis of linguistic features

(Patton, 1990; D'Andrade, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Silverman, 2001).

Strauss and Corbin (1998, pp. 65 - 68) similarly suggest key-word coding by “microanalysis which consists of analysing data word-by-word” and “coding the meaning found in words or groups of words” to categorize data so that concepts of the emerging themes can be recognised and developed.

Mason (2002, pp. 147 - 148) further describes how the researcher needs to be engaged in reading data “literally, interpretively or reflexively”. These include activities such as are “naming, grouping, finding relationships and displaying” (Freeman, 1998, p.102) and “coding for themes-looking for patterns-making interpretations” (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005).

For our particular analysis, we were guided by the following criteria.

Instrumental motivation: phrases indicating or pertaining to ‘use’, ‘usefulness’, ‘application’, ‘applicability’, ‘vehicular functionality’

Integrative motivation: phrases indicating or pertaining to a greater facility of incorporation, amalgamation, assimilation into life in New Zealand society

Findings

The analysis revealed some interesting and significant findings with regard to the students’ motivation and expected outcomes. The following are examples from their comments and are shown here to illustrate how phrases indicating motivations and outcomes were identified.

Motivation: instrumental and integrative

The phrases ***in bold*** indicate instrumental motivation while the ***underlined*** phrases indicate integrative motivation. Each marked out portion is taken as one phrase for the statistical count.

Instrumental:

Most commonly, English is considered a **commercial language (for business study)**. Therefore, a large number of people learn English mainly for this purpose.

To achieve a successful career, English skills in terms of speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in English are the most important necessity.

The course is designed very well, I have improved in every aspect at different extent, especially in writing, reading and vocabulary.

Next semester, I will study valuation and property management in Massey University. After EAS course, I have confidence to **study in mainstream**.

I need a **qualified certificate to seek a job**. This is the main reason why I want to study in an English country.

English and its culture has been dominated the whole world.

Therefore, I came to here for improving my English and I want to **attain a qualification** which is acceptable in the world.

Interestingly, some of the reflective comments suggest instrumentality in an almost literal sense, whereby English is regarded as a manipulable instrument:

English is **a tool**, a passport.

People want to improve their English **lever** and make it good enough to deal with some difficulties in their lives.

More than twenty years ago, when I was a teenager, I had realized that English was **a useful tool**. But poor English skill did not affect my living and studying due to my home country's educational and economic policy at that time.

Several years ago, when I worked for a Japanese bank, I more realized the important of English. But it still did not affect my **working**.

I wish to get local qualification to stay in New Zealand and start my **new career** in future. I have to get **a high level of English certificate to enter any university** because the goal of course is designed for tertiary study.

Integrative:

Because I had an assistant who majored in English in the university. He was in charge of translating for me. Until I lived in New Zealand which is an English speaking country. I had to control everything by myself. Poor English skill brings me a lot of trouble. Therefore, I decided to concentrate on English study.

Before EAS course, I wish to learn English to improve my capabilities to live in New Zealand. Now I reflect the benefit of New Zealand teaching methods, because it helps me improve not only language but also adaptabilities. I wish to get local qualification to stay in New Zealand and start my new career in future.

For us, we are living in English speaking country. We need English everywhere. So we must study English for ever.

We want to immerse the New Zealand society and adapt the environment.

Learning English for me mean to make me easy to integrate into the society.

I am sure that it is helpful to learn and use English in my life.

Outcomes: linguistic and non-linguistic

The following examples illustrate how indications of linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes were identified. Linguistic outcomes are where specific aspects of knowledge and skills (e.g. grammatical, phonological) in the language which students want to achieve, including course grades and achievement in proficiency tests, are indicated. Non-linguistic outcomes are where feelings students have towards the language and the target (New Zealand) community, including those pertaining to cultural values and beliefs with regard to the target community, are indicated

Phrases in ***bold italics*** indicate linguistic outcomes while those in *plain italics* indicate non-linguistic outcomes. As mentioned earlier, each marked out portion is taken as one phrase for the statistical count reported in the next section.

Linguistic:

The courses are designed very well, *I have improved in every aspect at different extent, especially in writing, reading and vocabulary.* Next semester, I will study valuation and property management in Massey University. After EAS course, I have *confidence to study in mainstream.*

I prefer British English *accent* because according to my experience, British accent is more difficult than American accent. So if I understand British accent perfectly, I would be able to understand American English accent automatically.

I learn that British use different *expression way* compare with American.

I learn how to *speak spoken language* and how to *use idiom.*

I found that it is not easy, especially when I need *prepair for IELTS test.* For me the most difficult thing is (*writing a reference list.*

My aim was to *improve language skill both in general and academic* English.

Non-linguistic:

I feel English speaker *more open and friendly* each other than Asian people. *New Zealand culture are people living freedom.*

I learn *some useful things and some good aspects in English culture and English society.* I learn to some extent, the *Western culture has more tolerance.*

Learning English has changed my *attitude and the way of looking of my life* after I immigrated to New Zealand. I am *not binding up by my own culture* anymore. Also *enlarge the future viewing.*

However, piety to parents still very important.

I know when we decide to stay in one specific place to be *happy and feel well with ourselves* first we need *to understand and accept the ways* is it and become part of the new system.

Statistical findings from the analysis of student motivation and language learning outcomes are summarised in the following tables.

Table 1: Motivation for studying in EAS

Motivation	Instrumental	Integrative
Total number of phrases examined = 151	118	33
Proportion of phrases	78.1%	21.9%

Table 2: Outcomes after EAS

Outcomes	Linguistic	Non-Linguistic
Total number of phrases examined = 55	42	13
Proportion of phrases	76.4%	23.6%

From their reflections, students repeatedly confirmed that (1) they are motivated more by instrumental benefits than by integration and (2) linguistic outcomes from learning the language are valued more highly than non-linguistic outcomes. The implications of these findings, in relation to course planning, are discussed in the following sections.

Discussion

This section discusses the above findings vis-a-vis current approaches and course programming issues relevant to NESB students. The findings and discussion are generalizable to students in similar NESB situations.

Benefits of the Genre Curriculum Cycle

Our findings reveal the need of instrumentality. In keeping with such a finding, we have found that vocabulary teaching and hence reading comprehension can be woven into the curriculum cycle because vocabulary common to a field of knowledge (e.g. business, finance, hospitality) can be taught in conjunction with the field construction stage and reinforced during modelling. Paltridge (2001) notes that language program development using a genre-based approach allows curriculum designers to group together texts that are similar in terms of purpose, organization and audience. It also allows students to become familiar with knowledge of the organizational and linguistic features of genres that they will need in their various work and studies.

We explicitly model text-types and their associated linguistic features even while planning is arranged around the curriculum cycle (Toh, 2000; Paltridge, 2001). There are set models, pre-structured

conventions that indicate shared commonalities, all demonstrable during the modelling stage. More or less the same curriculum cycle can be used right through from primary school genres (Derewianka, 1990) to genres required in tertiary institutions (Paltridge, 1997).

Also, in tandem with our findings on instrumentality, the genre approach has also allowed us to compare various communication styles of different countries for the benefit of students from different cultures. For example, a literature review for a thesis in the Thai or Chinese language may be different in language as well as structure from a literature review in English. Paltridge (2001) notes that students can engage in cross-cultural comparisons of systems of genres to see what is similar or different in English and in their first language. Students can also compare differing assumptions and expectations between the genre systems in the two languages.

Finally, we model not just language features of common genres like expositions and arguments, but also features characteristic of academic referencing and paraphrasing. This approach has enabled

students to understand the conventions of assignments typical of western universities and has raised their awareness of important aspects of the academic culture (U & Allan-Rae, 2003).

For example, the teacher can model tentativeness in academic writing (Toh, 2005). Tentativeness can be achieved through

- weakening of modal auxiliaries – “People of different cultures can/may/might/could find the Chinese way of life interesting.”
- adverbs such as usually or probably – “Interest rates usually tend to rise in a climate of inflationary pressures.”
- distancing words like tend, seem, appear – “It would seem/appear from the evidence shown that Hong Kong is winning the battle against pollution.”
- qualifications of the subject such as many, majority, in most respects, some – “In most respects, expatriates will find Hong Kongers to be practical and efficient ” (Toh, 2005).

In addition, different ways of acknowledging another author’s ideas can be modelled for students writing academic type expositions: “Tse

(1999) *points out that...*”, “*In a study by Li (1999)...*”, “Wong (1999) *has expressed that...*”, “Tsang (1999) *concur*s when she *notes that...*”

The generic stages of genres used in various settings, for example, the business proposal genre can also be modelled in class: letter of transmittal, executive summary, statement of problem, objectives of proposal, implementation, specification of materials and equipment, project personnel and their qualifications, time schedule, budget, evaluation.

From our findings, the utilitarian dimension is clearly very much valued in the students’ language study. Students are concerned about tangible linguistic outcomes, whether these be that they must master the skill of writing a reference list or gain the IELTS scores required for entry to many university courses. They also have to put their skills to immediate use, to write essays, assignments, proposals and reports.

In brief, students need the language for tertiary education in the immediate term and for the workplace in the longer term. It might,

therefore, be said that for those students with such motivation, learning to write could be regarded as a fairly clear-cut matter: the closer their writing approximates to generically recognisable and acceptable models, the better. Hence, a week-by-week course programme can even be planned around specific genres such as business proposals and expository essays.

Looking outside genre

However, there has been an increasing body of literature on academic literacies which EAS (and often ESOL) writing teachers using the genre approach need to engage with. Such writings concern what academic literacies theorists have to say about the teaching of writing in general and the genre curriculum cycle in particular; for example, what they have to say about generic “norms” in academia, university “requirements” and global communication.

We have become increasingly aware that, with the current approach, the focus of lessons is mostly on text features and language-*within*-text. With long-term needs of the students in mind, we are also

realising the need to help students think beyond text. Neat as it may be, one drawback of the above approach is that in its emphasis on the written text and text features, both tutors and students may lose sight of the overall context in which any genre can or cannot be used appropriately. Generic forms are, after all, “formalised” descriptions of communicative interaction and meaning making.

While text analysis is important for helping students achieve understanding of and gradual approximation to generic forms, such analysis may still not help students directly with actual application in real world situations. Paltridge (2000) is challenging when he notes that “much of what a learner needs to know in order to use a genre (actually) exists outside the text” (Paltridge, 2000, p.52). While it is consistent with students’ goals and aspirations for us to continue with modelling texts, it is equally important to think of ways of helping students place such texts within a context of use and usefulness – both within the university and in situations they will face after they graduate. It would be ironic if students achieve gradual approximation or mastery of a particular generic form, but still not know how to use

it when faced with real life situations. We have thus found that placing a particular genre within a context or sphere of use and/or usefulness remains consistent with the above findings.

Looking beyond genre

Looking further, we have also been challenged by the view that genres can be seen as instruments of institutional power and regulation (Prior, 1998; Lillis, 2003). Lea and Street (1998) call this “academic socialisation” and note the importance of understanding ideological implications behind practices which aim at having learners conform to genrified discourses as well as what Rhedding-Jones (2000) calls “colonizing discourses”. Dias, Freedman, Medway and Pare (1999, p.21) are similarly thought-provoking when they call genres “straitjackets” within an occupational culture. They are quick to note that individuals go along with a genre for the lack of choice. In the example of how hospital social workers have to report on cases, they note there is actually very little reshaping of individual desires in the process; these hospital workers may not end up being totally socialized into the hospital community of practice.

Moreover, Lea and Stierer (2000) point out that genres are not as homogeneous as they are thought to be because discourse communities like those in academia are not as homogeneous as genre adherents would like to think. Lea and Stierer (2000, p.7) note that teaching writing should not be thought of merely as helping students become “familiar with static disciplinary genres”, but with helping them understand ideologies behind “identities, discourses and institutional power relations”.

In relation to our NESB students who study English for instrumental purposes and who expect measurable linguistic outcomes, however, the question that we can ask is whether writing programs need or need not include an element of understanding ideologies behind institutional discourses. Put simply, our students *want to* learn English to write essays, pass university exams and come away with qualifications that will enable them to find work in tall buildings in central business districts. In addition, their time at university is both limited and costly. What needs to be considered, for example, is

whether there is sufficient time in a program for such ideological deconstruction work. There is also the question of whether students who diligently want (and pay) to be “schooled” in so-called academic genres may not become confused if they are then told that these genres are after all constructs of prevalent institutional structures.

Similarly, if told perhaps that the business report is actually an artefact of global capitalism or western capitalism, the question is whether this extra knowledge will mean that much to them since they will invariably have to be writing these business reports if they work for the big multinational firms they aspire to work for.

We have found this to be a difficult question. It is arguably more practicable in relation to our students and their quest for an instrumental English to keep with genre approximation and the curriculum cycle. Yet, it could also be argued that by including an ideological element in a writing programme, we may in the long run facilitate something much more powerful - their emancipation from genre approximation, thereby, allowing them to explore newer

instrumentalities through newer discursive practices. This, of course, is an inspiring ideal – to encourage our students to have a part in dialogising discursive practices, which may eventually prove to be ever more instrumental than generic forms books and courses describe and prescribe.

Given that students need to acquire instrumental skills to in turn work in real world situations, genre approximation is fairly mandatory in the short term. However, it would also be responsible that students coming under our charge be also told that genres are themselves artefacts constructed out of changeable socio-politico-cultural circumstances, which may, at a future time, be contested by people like themselves. Indeed, many from Asia will have experienced palpable socio-politico-cultural changes in their own lives.

Conclusion

Accommodating students with diverse needs and demands involves questioning our professional responsibilities and giving consideration to what optimal teaching means. For their successful functioning in

the courses they hope to enroll in and meet expectations of future employers, our students are often dependent on the extent to which they have been prepared.

In seeking to link student motivation and needs with course planning and in particular, planning for students learning the language for instrumental purposes, the article has sought to argue that genre-based approaches to writing instruction are useful, but must be complemented with helping students apply these generic forms in the context of real world situations. In relation to ideological matters, the article argues for a tempered approach to helping students understand language, ideology and power relations, considering the predominantly utilitarian aspirations such students have for language learning.

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