Summary/Commentary

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Session Title: Reading and Writing Expectations of Matriculated University Students

Presenters: Neil J Anderson, Brigham Young University; Norman Evans, Brigham Young University; James Hartshorn, Brigham Young University; Rochelle Keogh, University of Arkansas; and Elizabeth Webster, Michigan State University

Content Area: Applied Linguistics

Session Type: Colloquium

Summary

In this colloquium, presenters reviewed three separate but related research studies on the reading and writing expectations of matriculated university students and the implications for ELL students. The first study presented was a national survey done of university faculty in five of the most common majors at universities with a high percentage of international students. The other two presenters in the colloquium discussed the results of their interviews with international students and faculty members at their respective universities.

U.S. National Survey.

The first presenters in this colloquium, all from Brigham Young University, summarized the results of a national study they conducted of faculty in five of the most common majors for international students: Biology, Business, Computer Science, Engineering, and Psychology. The faculty members came from thirty different institutions that were identified as having a large percentage of international students. Specifically, at each campus, one course in each major was targeted as representing the "most essential beginning course for that major" (Anderson, et. al, handout, TESOL 2014, p.1). The researchers identified four research questions for this study:

1. How important are reading and writing compared to listening and speaking?
2. How much reading and writing are expected of students in their first major course?
3. What expectations do faculty have for student reading and writing?
4. What are the greatest reading and writing challenges?

The presenters identified a number of implications drawn from their research. First, they determined that faculty members perceive the receptive skills of listening and reading to be the most important language skills in their classrooms. Second, they found that the amount of reading required in introductory courses for all majors is quite high. Third, students are required to write large amounts of text in various forms in these introductory courses. Fourth, the researchers believe the results of their study indicate that the "one size fits all approach to academic reading should be reexamined" (Anderson, et. al, handout, TESOL 2014, p.4). Fifth, the researchers believe that ELL students should be given exposure to a wider variety of writing genres. Sixth, the researchers suggest that ELL students should be exposed to discipline specific reading materials as well as focused instruction in motivation and strategic reading. Finally, writing instruction should be focused on discipline specific genres, as well as having a focus on clarity and grammatical accuracy in writing.

Academic Challenges: The International Student Point of View.

Rochelle Keogh presented a survey of international students conducted at the University of Arkansas which sought to discover the academic challenges international students face as identified by the international students themselves. The researcher interviewed 181 undergraduate and graduate students majoring in science, engineering, business and social science. The guiding questions for this study were:

1. What are the academic challenges of international students?
2. What is the perceived importance of reading and writing to international students?

3. What types and amount of reading are required of international students?
4. What types and amount of writing are required of international students?

The researcher drew a number of implications from the results of her study that she suggested academic English programs around the country should consider. First she recommends that programs conduct their own survey to determine campus-specific needs of ELL students and additionally suggests that programs actively "raise awareness of these findings" (Anderson, et. al, handout, TESOL 2014, p.6) across the campus. For students who have matriculated out of the academic English program or were able to skip it altogether, she indicates the need to create writing orientation sessions and provide tutoring services for new students as well as provide training for writing center staff on the specific writing needs of ELL students. For students enrolled in the academic English program, she suggests either having a section of reading/writing classes tailored to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math students (STEM) or business students, or having reading/writing instructors consider student majors when designing tasks. She also suggests incorporating more technical writing activities for STEM students as well as direct instruction on writing formal/informal emails. Finally she suggests increasing the "focus on reading skills in class, but limit the amount of additional reading homework" (Anderson, et. al, handout, TESOL 2014, p.6) and teaching various test-taking strategies with a specific focus on how to write concisely and fluently.

Faculty Perspectives on What Students Need

Elizabeth Webster presented a needs assessment of faculty at Michigan State University. Faculty were surveyed and interviewed. The results of this needs assessment revealed that the main genres of reading expected of students in university courses included textbooks, academic articles, and media articles and ninety-one percent of participants stated that students were required to read between zero and fifty pages per week. Sixty-three percent stated that international students struggled with reading comprehension. Regarding writing expectations, the researcher found that 81% of faculty include some form of writing in the total class grade but that 46% do not include grammar or language use in those grades. The participants identified short answers, research papers, responses, summaries and lab reports as the main types of writing students have to do in their classes. The needs assessment also revealed that both domestic and international students struggle with academic honesty issues and that there is an "immediate need to teach international students about academic honesty" (Anderson, et. al, handout, TESOL 2014, p.7).

The researcher provided implications of this study that were similar to the other presenters in the colloquium. In particular, she suggested the incorporation of major-specific reading and writing activities, the inclusion of test-taking instruction, (e.g., how to write for exams), and direct instruction of email writing in classes. Additionally, she suggested instruction on academic honesty across the curriculum and recommended creating workshops on cultural norms.

Commentary

This presentation reports on research that lays the groundwork for a reinterpretation of teaching EAP. It recognizes that there is little research on discipline-specific faculty expectations for students and it targets disciplines that are most popular among international students making this research directly relevant to the international student population. This research also supports the idea that we should analyze authentic textbooks and writing assignments across the disciplines to help our students better prepare for their academic program.

The innovation is the discipline-specific approach to EAP. Professors of different disciplines appear to have different expectations of their students. For example, this study reports that business professors expect students to read approximately 85 pages per week while biology professors expect a little more than half that amount (45 pages) and only 37.5 pages are expected in computer science. These data contrast significantly with the length of typical readings in ESL textbooks for high-intermediate and advanced students. The length of research writing assignments also varies among the disciplines from approximately 30 pages in biology to nearly 20 pages in engineering to fewer than 5 pages in computer science. When asked about requirements for writing prose, as opposed to research, the page numbers go up for all disciplines. If it turns out that different disciplines have different demands, then a "one size fits all" approach to teaching

English for university study may not be appropriate. An example of a "one size fits all" approach would be the exclusive instruction of the 5-paragraph essay and grammar structures out of disciplinary context with the good intention that students will be able to transfer what they learned to the diversity of writing requirements from general education courses and classes in one's academic discipline. Whether students make the connection or not, to adequately prepare our students for their academic careers, the kinds of discoveries reported on in this presentation should not go unnoticed by materials writers and teachers of EAP.

A striking comment from the presentation was the report that students do not know how to read or write like biologists or psychologists. This comment was intended to reflect all students, not just international students. At first, this comment seemed strange. Why should introductory level university students be able to read and write in discipline-specific ways *before* taking the relevant courses? One explanation might be that the comment was intended to reflect weaknesses in students' high school education, an increasingly common complaint. Interpreted another way, however, this comment is quite revealing. It suggests that academia is about joining different discourse communities with agreed upon conventions for reading and writing. Students need to learn how to interact with texts in discipline-specific ways. If this is the case, then EAP curricula may need to reflect this fact. Our students may benefit from exposure to discipline-specific materials and instruction that show them how to engage the language, topics and organization styles used in different disciplines. To be clear, as EAP instructors we are not responsible for the *concepts* in different disciplines. We are, however, responsible for teaching how the language expresses academic concepts. Unlike our colleagues in biology and psychology, for example, we operate at the levels of word forms, word choice, phrases, collocations, grammar structures, topic sentences of paragraphs, and how topic sentences get developed into paragraphs and essays and other genres. The disciplines provide the content, and we provide instruction on how that content gets constructed and disseminated in academic English.

Surprising to us were the results on the importance of linguistic accuracy in writing. On a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 is not important and 4 is very important, the mean score for professors in psychology was 2.88. Biology was similar with 2.43 and computer science trailed off with 1.93. As EAP instructors, these low ratings for the importance of linguistic accuracy are hard to accept.

Of course we do not accept these data automatically. These findings will need to be replicated. Moreover, these findings may or may not be relevant for KU professors. The presenters suggested that attendees do the same research at their home institutions. We recommend that we replicate the study at KU to find out what KU faculty expectations are for students and what our international students expect of our faculty and their classes.

The research that was presented at the colloquium was limited in scope. For example, the presentation only considered popular majors. At KU, we can expand on the study by considering KU Core courses since most of our undergraduates will need to take those classes. We could also consider ENGL 101 and 102. Although math is universal, we may also want to find out what math faculty expect of beginning level students with respect to the four language skills. Any professional school with high numbers of international students should also be considered. We also have graduate students in the School of Education. The same kind of research can be done in conjunction with our colleagues in the School of Education but at the graduate level.

There are other ways we could go beyond the research presented at this colloquium. For example, we could explore the ways different disciplines "package" their content. For instance, introductory history textbooks use chronologies and maps while astronomy textbooks make use of photographs of the nighttime sky. Economics chapters list, explain, and illustrate principles, while communications studies textbooks incorporate models, which are common ways to present content in the disciplines. These ways of packaging content can be explored along with relevant language. In particular, the linguistic expression of concepts in the different disciplines can be examined. For example, textbook chapters make heavy use of noun phrases and noun clauses to introduce sections and subsections of chapters. These noun phrases/clauses encapsulate the main idea of a section and subsection. Are noun phrases used the same way across all disciplines? How are they used

in lectures? In a study that focused on noun clauses, Deroey (2012) found that they were mostly used "to highlight aspects of content information" and that "there was also disciplinary variation in their use" (p. 112). What about other grammar structures, collocations, or even individual words on the generic Academic Word List? Research by Hyland and Tse (2007) shows that even the same word on the AWL can be used differently and can have different meanings depending on the discipline. This line of research supports a discipline-specific approach to teaching EAP and could expose our students to the way academic English is authentically used in the context of different disciplines.

The presentation reported on exciting findings. These findings have the potential to motivate our own research project at KU and may lead to a realignment of our curriculum based on discipline-specific expectations of the very faculty members who will be teaching international students coming out of the AEC.

References

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Back to Table of Contents