

Specifically for Starters – Building specific discipline awareness over a typical pre-sessional (Fred Gooch)

Despite the growing awareness of the extent and nature of the differences in the use of academic language in different disciplines (Biber et al 1999, Hyland 2005; Gimenez 2011), many 'general' pre-sessional courses fail to adopt a systematic approach to subject specific EAP. Typically, a 'general' pre-sessional course teaches 'generic' EAP to mixed discipline classes, uses non-subject specialist tutors and tends to focus on short-term goals e.g. course entry requirements. I suggest here that these conditions can, in fact, be used to good advantage for discipline specific work, with little change required in either course structure or staffing.

One lesson (60/90 minutes) could be set aside for 'subject specific studies' with classes remaining as mixed disciplinary. Each session would deal with a conceptual area that would apply to all disciplines such as stance, engagement (Hyland, 2005) and/or voice, criticality and evidentiality (Gimenez 2011). Although there would be the need for an initial tutor-led introductory session, the process for each conceptual area would follow a similar format i.e.

- Tutor input on the concept, perhaps using a 'generic' academic text as an example
- Students analyse a self-chosen text from their own discipline in a similar way. Analysis could range from simply counting incidences of a specific item of language (e.g. use of first person) to a more complex linking of language use to the different subject epistemologies.
- Students in mixed disciplinary groups (or could present?) share/discuss /compare/contrast the findings of their analysis.
- General feedback and development as a class on the differences between disciplines in the specific conceptual area analysed.

This kind of approach could offer a number of advantages to both students and pre-sessional course managers. For students it could help revise and develop 'generic' EAP language and skills in a fresh (and more motivating) context. However, more importantly perhaps, it can provide analytical tools and skills for ongoing development beyond the pre-sessional, leading to some measure of learner independence. Furthermore, because students will not only learn about aspects of language use in their own discipline, this should be of value for those on combined degree courses which cut across two or more disciplines. For course managers, such sessions are adaptable in terms of time and could relatively easily be fitted into an existing pre-sessional structure. Subject specific tutors are not required, although clearly tutors with some training/experience in basic textual analysis would be required.

To properly prepare students for the kind of language use specific to their subject discipline, pre-sessional courses need to provide more discipline-related academic awareness. I have suggested that this could be done by non-subject specific tutors in mixed discipline groups within an existing 'general' pre-sessional framework, by using a comparative text-based approach based on key areas of analysis organised by concept.

These ideas have yet to be put into operation and there are possible problem areas (for example, student accessibility of discipline-related texts in terms of lexis and complexity). However, this kind of approach would seem to offer a practical framework to help give students the tools to make better sense of the language demands of their own academic discipline and academic community

References

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