3. THE ANALYSIS AND CONSTRUCTION OF ARGUMENTS IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

Saturday 11th June 1994

The English as a Foreign Language Unit, University of York

Organiser: Andy Curtis

This subject had aroused much interest when raised at the 1993 BALEAP Conference and so it was decided to make it the theme for a one day PIMs meeting. Presenters from the University of York, from other UK institutions and from further afield led sessions designed to develop ideas which could be put to practical use in the EAP classroom and a wide variety of approaches and materials were discussed.

The theme was the application of research into various aspects of argumentation in academic language to the teaching and learning of the analysis and construction of arguments, primarily in written academic texts.

In order to combine several presentations, hands-on workshops and the opportunity for a question-and-answer session, the programme was arranged with five short presentations in the morning each of which was developed into an afternoon workshop. Each workshop ran twice so that each participant had the opportunity to attend two.

Programme:

1. Andy Curtis (University of York) - The Use of Short Video Excerpts in the Teaching of Argument Structure.
2. Sally Mitchell (Leverhulme Trust Project on Argumentation - University of Hull) -Argument in Essay Writing in Sixth Forms and Higher Education.
3. Graham Low - Exploiting Political Campaign Materials in Investigating Argumentation
4. Ann-Charlotte Lindeberg (Swedish School of Economics, Helsinki) - Verb Phrases and Knowledge Claims in the Introductions of Research Papers.
5. Philip Shaw (University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne) - Arguments Used in the Discussion Sections of Doctoral Theses.

Andy Curtis (University of York): *Teaching Argument Structure*

In the presentation and linked workshop the application of concepts of language and argument in the EAP classroom were explored. In analysing the features which are commonly found in the argumentation process, including ambiguity, emotive language, euphemisms, hedging and metaphor, it was shown that these are rarely, if at all, covered in published materials for EAP. It was proposed that authentic video material could be used as a data source to aid the explicit teaching of this aspect of communication.

The use of the ten minute 'Comment' slot on Channel 4 was demonstrated as a source of data for analysis of how arguments are structured and of how these may be functionally and linguistically realised. Materials developed around these programmes were then tried out by participants in the workshop session and the procedure and the materials themselves were critically assessed.

Sally Mitchell: *From source material to essay: some intermediary writing stages.*

This contribution to the PIMs meeting at York University in June 1994 was based on a three year research project entitled: *The Teaching and Learning of Argument in Sixth Forms and Higher Education* which was funded by the Leverhulme Trust and based at the University of Hull. The project

was broadly ethnographic in method and involved extensive observation of classroom and seminar situations, and the collection of both oral and written data. Subject areas ranging from English to Electronic Engineering were investigated in an attempt to understand the particular nature and uses of argument in learning a discipline. Whilst it became clear that argument in one area was distinct in important ways from argument in another, certain common features and common problems were apparent. Most notably in the Arts and Humanities, these concerned the essay; a written form which at A level and beyond is a major vehicle of individual expression. It is the ability to write a 'good' essay that - often exclusively - determines a student's success in her area of study.

One of the most important criteria to a 'good' essay is the demonstration of argument, and although it may not be made explicitly the case, this argument will usually involve the discussion of more than one point of view and the use of such alternatives to establish a position of one's own. Academic argument, that is, is not polemic and does not involve the spontaneous flowering of opinion. Rather it is a strategic and apparently largely reasonable process where a kind of suspicious deference is shown to those who have already put forward arguments or evidence on the topic in question. The deference is suspicious because the ultimate aim is to say something - slightly, more often than hugely - different to what has been argued before.

If the academic argument sounds rather tricky and subtle, I think it is, and certainly for many of the students I observed it seemed a difficult task to perform. Common and related difficulties included failure to extract the thematic from the particular in order to make contrast and comparison possible, structuring material in a way that avoided, rather than exploited, contradictions or questions, difficulty with expressing or developing the writer's point of view anywhere other than in the 'introduction' or 'conclusion'. Such difficulties appeared to arise from apparently competing demands on the student: that she understand and demonstrate knowledge and that she act upon knowledge to change it. Lurking here is a contrast - more perceived than actual - between a discipline as an authoritative subject to be grasped and as a process to be engaged in. At least this seemed to be the kind of pedagogical message students received. Consider the way courses are described in terms of the content to be covered, how teaching rarely focuses on the way discourse operates, on how to read for the construction of argument, on how to write in such a way as to contribute to a debate rather than reproduce it. 'Study skills' are increasingly available to students, it is true, but they are rarely integrated as part of disciplinary learning itself. Content is shared, whilst discourses (what Gee 1989 calls 'saying-(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations') are hidden, not discoursed about. It is discourses, however, which make content meaningful in particular disciplinary-specific ways and it is with discourse that the key to a student's success lies.

It was such observations as these that prompted my contribution to the day in York, with teachers and researchers who are accustomed to thinking about the processes of learning an academic discipline. I suggested some structured work on source material (4 opinions on a single issue) which would start with summary - an important stage for students in securing their understanding of content, but a stage which they frequently do not move beyond - and go on to the identification of common themes, about which there are different things to say and, so, to the planning of an essay, which would convey the complexity of an issue and not be subservient to any one received position. In a sense the stages were a slowing down or magnifying of some of the stages involved in writing an essay, with time and techniques available to effect the transitions from the reception of material to the generation of argument. (My thinking here was influenced by the work of Geisler and Kaufer 1989). The workshop provided the opportunity to explore these ideas further and try out the proposed stages using extracts from the Radio 4 programme 'Any Questions'.

The final report of the Argument project, costing £5.00 can be obtained from:

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Graham Low (University of York): *Investigating Arguments in Formal Situations*

The purpose of the paper was to examine briefly what people do with arguments in formal situations. The first point was to note that there are strong social reasons why writers want to create the illusion of rational argument in text. A number of political fliers from a recent by-election were examined in an attempt to find some of the devices and mechanisms writers used to promote the status of themselves, their beliefs and the reader's status.

It was then argued that the expectations and power games associated with academic essays were not that dissimilar from the political situation, and that this accounted, in part at least, for the cluster of textual characteristics that tended to make academic texts hard to read or interpret; that is to say, writing an essay is like playing a game with arguments and one is trying to find a balance between hermeticism and transparency.

The second main point was to examine the other side of the coin and look at the job of the reader of academic texts (i.e. Articles and essays), given this situation. The old General Systems model of creativity from the 1960s was used to make a useful distinction between problem solving (or even problem avoiding) and problem finding, and it was suggested that problem finding was an important component of reading academic texts effectively, although few EAP books contained much on the topic. (See the Critical Reading diagram).

The workshop accompanying the talk looked at the vocabulary used to describe logical gaps, mismatches with empirical data, relating an argument to a known/familiar position and relationships between arguments and assumptions. It ended with a brief consideration of how to teach students to extract/reconstruct syllogistic-type structures from hedged academic texts. The discussion in the group also raised the useful question of the overlap between oral and written skills in several of the areas concerned and how far they should be taught in an integrated way.

Ann-Charlotte Lindeberg (Swedish School of Economics, Helsinki): *Verb Phrases, Knowledge Claims, and Argumentative Structure in the Introductions of Research Papers*

The aim of the presentation was to propose a descriptive, incremental model that can be used for computerised analysis of large samples of text which will, in turn, provide a means of teaching academic writing to novice scholars in English as an L1 as well as in English as a Foreign Language by highlighting linguistic signals of structuring and argumentation in the texts.

In order to do this it is necessary to first identify how we know a text is argumentative and then to devise means of showing that it is, so that students' awareness can be raised of the linguistic signals that are in the text. Students must become text linguistic/discourse analysts along with their EAP teachers as the ideal material, appropriate for any and every course and academic writing task, has not been invented. Thus the teacher must provide the analytic tools so that the student will be empowered through the process.

The workshop gave participants the opportunity to apply the model to texts and consider the pedagogic implications.

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Philip Shaw (University of Newcastle): *A Pilot Study of Arguments in the Discussion Sections of Dissertation*

Investigation of the discussion section of dissertations suggests that, in them, argumentation is structured in a particular way. This, it is suggested, makes it possible to establish the relationship between argument structures and genre-analytical moves. From this an attempt can be made to identify more clearly what it is that students need to learn about arguments in their particular subject discipline and to develop exercises to explicitly teach this. Among the key aspects thus identified are, for example, the need to know what to background and what to foreground as a claim; when to hedge; what counts as new and what as old; and how to define the scope of the claims being made.

Although consideration was given to conflicting views regarding the practicality of teaching 'genre', it was argued that the difficulties did not deny the value of explicit teaching, quoting Williams & Columb (1993) in their claim that teaching the forms is a way of teaching the ability to structure one's experience in the way the discipline demands.

Therefore, it was proposed that, having identified, as far as possible, what it is that students need to learn about arguments, it should be possible to identify and teach the linguistic realisations of these different concepts - that is, the vocabulary and grammatical forms that are required to express them. A number of examples of such exercises were used as illustrations of this.

In the workshop, sample activities and exercises focussing on various elements in argumentation were presented for participants to try out. These included an exercise in making claims from data and another in product reconstruction.

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