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Language Development in a Business Faculty in Higher Education: A Concurrent Approach

Abstract

This article draws on the principle that language development programs are most effective when contextualized to the setting for which the language is required. It considers written language development in higher education for international students, whose first language is not English. In the context of a business faculty, the program explored in this article discusses the findings from a study of the expectations of teachers in the faculty, in terms of their students' writing. The 'indicators' that emerge from the study are interpreted in terms of values of the business faculty in general, and the disciplines that make up the faculty. These provide a focus at the discourse and sentence level for language instruction, as well as assisting students to better appreciate the values that structure their studies and shape their learning.

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Introduction

It is well-established that language learning is most successful when contextualized to the particular setting in which the language will function, and for which its development is required. This is because the values and the way of viewing the world of the particular setting are shared between the parties involved in the acts of communication. These values impact on and shape the language of successful communication. Thus, the language learner is not focusing on isolated and unconnected linguistic operations, but participating in meaningful communicative acts; the language and hence the communication are operating as a social practice. In the higher education setting in Australia which includes a large number of international and local students for whom English is a second language, the further development of students' English language continues as they undertake their studies. This is especially so in relation to the development of written language, which is largely the form through which students' academic development is assessed. As such, further written language development means assisting students to communicate effectively in their disciplinary studies.

In this article, the values of successful written communication in a business faculty are explored through a study that investigated these from the perspectives of the teachers.

As a business faculty is comprised of a number of disciplines of study, students need to be cognizant of and operate within the values and assumptions of the business context in general, as well as those of the particular disciplines. Drawing on the findings from the study, the purpose of this article is to discuss a program to assist students' written language development in the context of their disciplinary studies. The advantage of the approach outlined is that, in addition to the development of students' language skills, their understandings of the values that underpin the discourses of their disciplines are enhanced. Thus, students' overall learning is assisted.

Language and Communication Development in Context

The view that language operates as a social practice acknowledges that meaning (or reality) in different settings is based on the values and relationships of the participants in that setting (Bruffee 1986; Swales 1990). Furthermore, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), knowledge and learning are situated, and learning develops from experience and social action. The community's shared meanings shape communication, and community members learn to communicate in ways that will be understood by other members of the community.

In relation to academic disciplines of study, Becher's (1989) well-accepted view is that knowledge and the discipline's culture are intertwined. Becher (1989) explains that, for instance, in a discipline such as science, the development of knowledge is linear, and for a humanities discipline, it tends to be more recursive (Becher, 1989). Bizzell (1992) and Beaufort (1997) refer to such a setting as a discourse community, where shared meanings reflect community-based norms and expectations. These are embedded in discourse conventions, which, in turn, reflect the community's work. Therefore, as Lea and Stierer (2000) state, writing in higher education is shaped by the cultural setting in which the written communication occurs.

To sum up and as Hyland (2002) also explains, successful communication is based on community members selecting ways to present their ideas that make sense to, and can be understood, by their readers. He explains that different disciplines have different views of knowledge, research, practices and ways of seeing the world that are reflected in diverse forms of argumentation and expression. In relation to academic literacies, Lea and Street (1997) also maintain that the values are mediated through the parties of the staff as the teachers in the disciplines, the students, and the institution, which represents power and authority. Lea and Street (1997) point out that students' writing problems reflect a gap between staff expectations of what constitutes successful writing, and those of the students.

Language and Communication in a Business Disciplinary Setting

A recent study in which the author was a researcher and which produced the data for this article, was completed in a business faculty in an Australian university. The study explored the expectations of teaching staff in terms of what constitutes successful student writing in assessment tasks (Crosling, 2005, provides a fuller explanation of the

study). These expectations relate to a business faculty in general, and also to its disciplines, which are Accounting and Finance; Business Law and Taxation; Econometrics and Business Statistics; Economics; Management; and Marketing. The subject leaders of large subjects across the faculty disciplines were surveyed, and asked to rank on a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, the importance of a list of indicators for successful writing in their disciplines. A total of 125 subject leaders were invited to complete the survey, and more than 60 percent of these responded.

The list of indicators used in the survey was developed from a literature survey of the characteristics of academic writing. The indicators were: addressing the task; establishing a clear purpose in the written piece; formulating an unambiguous response; developing/explaining a response logically; concluding clearly; presenting information in a coherent and logical way; adapting data/information to meet the reader's needs; supporting points with evidence from research and/or data; using clear English expression; using correct grammar, spelling and syntax; using suitable referencing techniques.

The results of this study provide a profile of the characteristics of successful writing in general in the business faculty, as well as expected forms across the faculty's disciplines. In turn, these characteristics are very useful in assisting students in language development programs for the academic business context.

The survey results indicate that at the faculty level, the following characteristics of written communication are most important:

- Presenting information in a coherent and concise way
- Addressing the task
- Developing and explaining a response logically
- Establishing a clear purpose in the written piece
- Supporting points with evidence from research and/or data.

When the descriptors are investigated individually across the disciplines, some similarities and differences emerge. Table 1 below summarises the higher ranking indicators for each of the disciplines, in priority order.

Discipline	Higher Scoring Descriptors
Accounting and Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing task • Coherent and concise expression of information • Logical development/explanation of response • Clear conclusion • Clear purpose
Business Law and Taxation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logical development/explanation of response • Clear English expression • Clear conclusion • Coherent and concise expression of information • Points supported with research/data/evidence

Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coherent and concise expression of information • Addressing task • Logical development/explanation of response • Clear conclusion
Econometrics and Business Statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Points supported with research/data/evidence • Data/information adapted to meet reader's needs • Coherent and concise expression of information • Clear purpose
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Points supported with research/data evidence • Clear purpose • Addressing task • Logical development/explanation of response
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear conclusion • Coherent and concise expression of information • Addressing task • Clear purpose • Unambiguous response • Logical development /explanation of response • Points supported with research/data evidence

Table 1: Faculty Disciplines and Higher Rating Descriptors

It can be seen from Table 1 above that the highest four indicators across the disciplines are similar to the general faculty expectations for written communication discussed earlier. For instance, "Coherent and concise expression of information" is placed in the higher rankings by all but the Business Law and Taxation discipline. "Logical development/expression of information" is a high ranking indicator in all disciplines except for Econometrics and Business Statistics. "Clear purpose in the written piece" is high in all but the disciplines of Economics, and Business Law and Taxation. These indicators may be interpreted as a common core across the faculty disciplines. For the purposes of this study, the indicators have not been classified beyond a descriptor level. However, the potential exists to group and further categorize these descriptors for additional purposes.

The next section in this article discusses the way that the particular preferences across the business disciplines reflect their practices and purposes, and thus their values, or ways of looking at the world.

The Indicators as Values of the Business Discipline¹

As mentioned previously, some of the indicators occur across the disciplines of the faculty. This suggests that they reflect the desired characteristics for writing in a business faculty in general. The major and basic function of business has been explained as obtaining financial return for time, effort and capital expended (Wikipedia-Business, 2004). In this context, the indicators fulfill a purpose in terms of efficient and purpose-driven business operations. "Concise and coherent expression" means that information is conveyed efficiently and directly, saving time and cost. This

¹ These are explained more fully in Crosling (2005).

function is also served for both the writer and the reader by a written piece that addresses its task. "Logical development/explanation of a response" contributes to the achievement of efficacious communication; a logical structure is convincing in that it conforms to the expectations of logic often held by people with western backgrounds and outlooks (Risbett, 2003). It also demonstrates a sense of purpose and is therefore efficient, as well as indicating a sense of professionalism, direction, and competence. For instance, a discourse structure that makes a point, and then explains and provides evidence is direct and does not require the reader to use high levels of inference. It leaves less room for unintended reader interpretations and is thus efficient. An example of such a structure is as follows:

"The major advantage of this process is that This is achieved through several steps, where the first is"

The above structure may be compared with the following:

"The first step was to, which provided the benefit of This was followed by Thus, the major advantage of this process is that"

The findings from the survey show that Marketing is the only discipline to rate "Formulating an unambiguous response" highly. When considered in relation to Marketing practice which in general is concerned with developing and marketing products to meet consumers' needs, and creating consumers' needs through products, this indicator takes on meaning. A product must unambiguously be presented as the best, creating a view in the consumer's mind that it is best able to meet their needs, and therefore warranting purchase. For instance, a sentence structure such as: "The car is safe and economical to run." is less ambiguous and more direct than the following example: "While some other cars have varying degrees of safety, this one is also economical to run."

Business Law and Taxation includes the indicator of "Clear English expression" as a high ranking descriptor. Such a strong emphasis can be understood in a setting where law is made and enacted through language. A major disciplinary practice is that law is precisely established following its close examination in relation to the facts of a situation. Clear use of language assists close and accurate interpretation and communication. The inclusion of "Points supported by research/data/evidence" as higher ranking also accords with the discipline's practice of arriving at legal decisions following analysis of a situation's facts in relation to the law. An example of this practice reflected in language is:

"An offer has clearly been made by Arthur to sell his antique desk to Harry for \$3,000. The first question is whether Harry's reply was a counter-offer, or a request for further information. If it was a counter offer, then, as was held in the case, it amounted to a rejection of Arthur's offer. Arthur's offer would therefore have terminated, and there would have been no contract" (from Crosling and Murphy, 2000).

Econometrics and Business Statistics is concerned with collecting and analyzing data for business purposes. Thus, the inclusion at the higher level of importance of "Adapting data to meet the reader's needs" can be understood. Data needs to be

presented in a way that meets the needs of the party by whom it is required. The inclusion of clear purpose complements such a client-based approach. A client-based approach is also evident in the higher scoring indicators for Accounting and Finance, where “Addressing the task”, “Clear purpose” and “Clear conclusion” all relate to such activity. For instance, a report in these disciplines is expected to explicitly express its purpose: “The aim of this report is to” is a commonly-used structure.

In Economics, the presence of “Logical development of a response” and “Clear conclusion” as desired attributes in writing can be explained in relation to the discipline’s practices. The activity and credibility of hypotheses formation, which is intrinsic to economic analysis, is based on logical development of a response. Presentation and justification for hypotheses is dependent on the use of conditional language structures and modality, as well as the use of connective words and phrases to explain cause and affect processes. An example of an expected structure of information is seen in the following:

“The supply of is dependent on If the rises, then
This results in and On the other hand,”

Language Development Programs in the Context of Higher Education Studies

International students who gain positions in higher education in Australia need to meet a prescribed level of English language competence. For international students, as for all commencing students, higher education is a new experience, requiring students to make transitions to new ways of approaching knowledge and learning. However, the stage of transition can be more problematic for international students, who also have to adjust to a range of other life changes. These include a different country and culture, as well as teaching and learning in English as a second language. At the same time, the disciplines in which students take their studies have their own requirements, to which students must adjust for success. Given these pressures, it is not surprising that international students may require support with English language while they undertake their studies.

As a consequence of the heavy workload in higher education studies and perhaps because of the greater amount of time required to access their subject materials in English which is most often not their first language, it is not always feasible to expect students to also undertake language development programs. This is despite the fact that they would assist some students to study more efficiently and effectively. Thus, the suggestions for language development programs put forward in this article contextualize language to the students’ disciplines of study. While students are being acquainted with appropriate approaches to study for these disciplines, language development can also occur. For instance, a seminar may be held for students on researching and writing their first assignment in a particular subject. In elucidating on the values that shape the discipline’s culture and thus successful writing, students can also receive instruction that will further develop their language skills. This approach is explained in the next section of this article.

Teaching Language and Written Communication in the Business Disciplinary Context

As mentioned in the previous section, an academic support program which includes pre-assignment-submission seminars, provides a forum for students' language development.

The indicators of successful written communication examined above for the business faculty in general and for the particular disciplines provide guidance, and a focus, for discipline-specific language programs. The indicators can readily be interpreted in terms of discourse and sentence structures, and the grammatical forms inherent in these can function to strengthen students' English language skills.

Furthermore, the indicators can be positioned and explained as fulfilling a purpose in the disciplinary value system. Thus, students study language forms and structures that are not isolated and disembodied, but reflect a particular value of the setting. Students' written language development is thus authentic and has meaning. A further advantage of this approach is that the contextualization of the language forms assists students to understand better and become increasingly cognizant of, and initiated into, the values of the disciplines, which shape their learning.

Turning more specifically to some of the general faculty indicators outlined in the previous section, the indicator of "Presenting information in a coherent and concise way" provides the opportunity for focus on language features such as discourse and sentence structure. Relevant forms are relative clauses, nominalization, and noun phrases. These condense information and facilitate succinct expression. For coherence, consideration in the program of connecting words and phrases, their functions and usage, forces a consideration of coherence in a written text at the discourse level, and across sentences. The focus on students' understanding of the appropriate use of anaphoric references also aids text coherence.

The indicator of "Establishing a clear purpose in the written piece" provides an opportunity for consideration of and instruction about sentence structure. It may be seen that active rather than passive sentence structure contributes to a sense of purpose, and thus both may be explored and contrasted in terms of function and grammatical structure. At the discourse level, this indicator also provides relevance for the organization of academic written expression where the thesis statement, which encapsulates the purpose of the text, is provided early in the written piece, and often in the introduction. Thus, text organization can be a focus at this point.

The indicator of "Supporting points with evidence or data" provides the opportunity for discussion of the academic practice of academic enquiry, as well as the introduction of language forms for providing such evidence. For instance, a structure such as "As Lee (2003) states...", leads to discussion of the function and structure of adverbial clauses. At the semantic level, the relative strength of reporting verbs can be discussed. These include verbs such as "argue", "suggest", and "point out" which are commonly used in author-prominent structures to introduce citations in academic writing.

Turning now to some of the discipline-specific indicators, for the Marketing discipline, the indicator of "Formulating an unambiguous response", while revealed at the

discourse level through the structure of the written piece, may also be seen as reflected in unambiguous sentence structures. Thus, language exploration can focus on sentence structures that are unambiguous, as well as ambiguous. (An example has been provided earlier in this article.)

An indicator that is required in writing in the Business Law field is “Clear written expression”. While this may be interpreted in many ways, it can be seen as expression that is uncluttered and relatively simple in form. This would be in line with the recent movement in the legal world for ‘plain legal English’. Thus, sentences which do not include many relative clauses may be compared with those that do, opening up the discussion about the grammatical structure and function of these. This situation leads to discussion of sentences that are largely composed of one main idea (a subject, a verb and an object), compared to those that co-ordinate and subordinate information.

In the Economics field where the indicators of “logical development of a response” and “Forming a clear conclusion” have been noted as desired characteristics, the logical development of a response includes hypothesising from given to future situations. This situation provides a forum for discussion of conditional language structures and modality, as well as at the discourse level, connecting words and phrases for cause and effect explanations. It also allows for a language focus on subordination and co-ordination in and across sentences, before arriving at a conclusion which is therefore clear. Relevant here is the example provided earlier in this article.

Further Implications for Student Learning

This article has put forward the view that language teaching for students whose first language is not English in the higher education setting may be contextualized to the disciplines in which students undertake their studies. An outcome of this approach is that students explore and receive instruction about the language forms that are expected by established members of the particular disciplines, as well as being able to strengthen their appreciation of the values. In turn, as these values are reflected in the approach to disciplinary knowledge and successful thought patterns, the process of making these explicit assists students in their disciplinary learning. These values also shape successful study as disciplinary patterns are reflected in disciplinary actions, from the organization of information in text books, to the organization and structure of spoken discourse practice (Crosling, 1996).

Another positive outcome of the approach outlined in this article is that the language learning foci serve an immediate purpose for the students as they are required for successful communication in the discipline. Thus, students’ motivation to master the particular discourse and language structures is enhanced. This is because these practices apply to and take on meaning in the disciplinary setting, rather than operating as disembodied language requirements.

Conclusion

In terms of concurrent language development for students in higher education, this article has discussed the results of a study of teachers' expectations for written communication in a business faculty. These expectations provide a context for language development programs. Because the language development occurs as the values of a discipline are explained in relation to written assignment expectations, it is relevant to students' needs. It also assists them to better understand their subjects and disciplinary fields. While this article has explored some of the discourse and sentence level structures relevant to the indicators derived from the study, the list is exemplary rather than categorical.

International students in higher education do often require English language support and, as time is often a luxury, efficient means to achieve this are required. This article has outlined one approach which provides the support, and also further assists students in their disciplinary studies.

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