

Issue 4 | October 2009

InForm

A journal for international foundation programme professionals

The potential of problem-based learning in IFPs

Cross-curricular collaboration through the IFP

Teacher development/learner development

Laying the foundations for discipline-specific writing skills

And more ...



InForm

Conference 2010

The challenges ahead

We are proud to announce the first *InForm* conference which will provide an additional dynamic to the existing forum provided by the *InForm* Journal. The event will take place at the University of Reading and will include seminars and workshops on themes related to international foundation programmes.

Saturday 17 July 2010

Palmer Building, Whiteknights Campus
University of Reading

Conference fee: £55.00

Registration

To register, please complete the enclosed registration form or download a copy from www.reading.ac.uk/inform

Registration forms should be received along with the conference fee no later than 31 May 2009

Keynote Speaker

The plenary session will be delivered by representatives of UK NARIC, the National Agency responsible for providing information and advice about vocational, academic and professional skills and qualifications from all over the world.

Speaker Proposals

Speaker proposals are invited from professionals involved in the delivery of International foundation and pathway programmes. As usual, the focus should be on issues associated with teaching and learning in this particular sector. Sessions need to appeal to tutors and course managers from across the curriculum.

We are particularly interested in receiving proposals which involve collaboration between tutors across subject areas, as this aligns with the inherent diversity embedded within most International Foundation Programmes.

In order to submit a proposal, please submit an abstract of no more than 60 words and a presentation outline of no more than 250-words.

A speaker proposal form is enclosed in this edition and available for download from

www.reading.ac.uk/inform

Please email all speaker proposals to inform@reading.ac.uk by 31 March 2010

Inside *InForm* ...

- 03 **The potential of problem-based learning in IFPs and pre-sessional courses**
- 05 **Cross-curricular collaboration through the IFP**
- 07 **Teacher development/learner development: the role of reflective practice**
- 09 **Laying the foundations for discipline-specific writing skills**
- 11 **A question of knowledge: academic reliability in the information age**
- 13 **Information structure problems in IFY student writing**
- 15 **Developing critical reading skills through the interactive whiteboard**

InForm

Issue 4 | October 2009

Editor Mr Anthony Manning

Editorial Board

Dr Elena Bedisti, Mrs Amanda Fava-Verde, Dr Prue Griffiths, Mr Anthony Manning, Ms Clare Nukui, Dr Graham Van Wyk

Design

Designed in house by the Design & Print Studio

Printers Advent Colour, Andover

InForm is published by the International Study and Language Centre, University of Reading.

For further information concerning any of the articles in this issue, please contact:

The Editor, *InForm*, International Study and Language Centre, Blandford Lodge, University of Reading, Whiteknights, PO Box 217, Reading, RG6 6AH
Tel +44(0)118 378 7220
Fax +44(0)118 378 6279
Email a.manning@reading.ac.uk
www.reading.ac.uk/inform

No part of *InForm* may be reproduced without the prior permission of the publisher. Whilst every care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of editorial content, no responsibility can be taken for any errors and/or omissions. The views expressed in *InForm* are not necessarily those of the University of Reading, the Editor or the Editorial Board. All rights reserved.

From the Editorial Board ...

The editorial team would like to thank the readership of *InForm* for its sustained support, both in terms of quality article submission and the constructive letters and comments that we continue to receive.

The forum created through *InForm* aims to provide IFP professionals from across the curriculum, with a medium for the discussion of matters related to teaching and learning in this sector. It is clear that you, as readers and contributors, have been very successful in spreading the word and achieving this objective.

As announced in the last issue, the first *InForm* conference will take place in summer 2010. The one-day-conference is scheduled for Saturday 17 July at the University of Reading. We sincerely hope that you will join us in developing *InForm* further in this way and we look forward to networking with those of you who are able to attend the event. If you are interested in attending or presenting please complete the forms enclosed within this copy of *InForm*. Further information can also be found on our website www.reading.ac.uk/inform

Issue 4 presents a number of key themes which have important implications for IFP professionals across the academic spectrum. The first article describes the motivational potential offered by Problem-Based Learning in the IFP context. This is followed by a discussion surrounding the opportunities for cross curricular collaboration provided by the diverse IFP curriculum. The importance of teacher development in the IFP sector is then highlighted. The next topic raised relates to discipline-specific writing skills. Other articles delve further into the persistent themes of academic reliability, information structure and critical thinking.

As always, we welcome your comments and contributions which can be sent to inform@reading.ac.uk

Anthony Manning
Chair of the *InForm* Editorial Board



'Dear InForm'

Dear InForm,

I read with a great interest a summary of the most recent study by Nicola Hughes on the link between student attendance and their performance in the last issue of *InForm*. It is a topic, which continuously crops up in conversations with my colleagues in our staff room and on the agenda of our departmental meetings.

The standpoint taken by our faculty team is that IFY students must be committed to high levels of attendance on the course if they want to succeed academically. Lecturers encourage class attendance because students, who recurrently skip class, notably increase their odds of a poor grade in the Foundation Year. Fig 3 and 4 in the original article show that there is a positive correlation between class attendance and students final grades.

Specifically, Nicola Hughes indicates in her study that students, who attend at least 50% of their classes, have more than a 50% chance of achieving the Pass rate. Furthermore, this study suggests that an irregular class attendance below 70% was statistically significant in explaining why a student achieved slightly lower grade: a D rather than a C, a C or a B rather than an A grade.

I strongly support one of the key messages behind this article which recommends that lecturers should strongly encourage attendance on the Foundation Year through all available mechanisms, including quality teaching and supportive tutoring.

Vitalia Kinakh

Lecturer
The Manchester College

Response from Nicola Hughes:

The link between attendance and success has probably been remarked upon by tutors and teachers since the dawn of formalized education. I was interested to see whether one could quantify and measure that link. I have started to use the graphs as a tool in induction activities to illustrate the point. Feedback to date would indicate that the students do take note and respond. The comment regarding whether there is a statistical link between attendance and grade attainment beyond passing or failing is one that interests me also but that analysis is still at a very early stage.

Dear InForm,

I found the three articles in issue 3, written by Boyle, Finn and Nukui extremely thought-provoking. It is clear that a great deal of attention is devoted on foundation programmes to cultural awareness as well as the development of subject knowledge, language and academic skills.

Whilst the inclusion of cultural training seems to becoming a key consideration, I would like to ask the question, to what extent it is the role of IFP provides to manage this area of transition? The positive influence of such provision seems obvious, but it might be worthwhile considering how far we, as IFP professionals, should go and where the students own responsibility resides.

I would welcome the views of *InForm's* readership.

Regards,

Graham Van Wyk

Lecturer
Oxford Brookes University

Dear InForm,

I was fascinated by the article 'Sojourner adjustment and international students' by Martin Boyle in Issue 3. At SOAS, we have long wrestled with the issues of integrating foundation students into the main campus, and providing social activities that could assist students in their adjustment to life in England and ease their sense of isolation and homesickness.

Boyle has provided me with interesting ideas, both pedagogic and social, which I intend to raise with my seniors in our next meeting.

Thank you!

Cher Morris di Boscio

Foundation Programme Leader
SOAS

Response from Martin Boyle:

Authenticity is the key. It seems to me that the student community is the right and proper mediator of adjustment to a university campus. Student union clubs and societies are so ubiquitous and so defining of the UK university experience and international students so notoriously reluctant to join them that it seems logical to have a degree of compulsion which involves a wide choice. Clubs and societies create an authentic social and cultural milieu for students so that teachers do not need to concern themselves with providing what are often strained and artificial social activities which scream 'you are outsiders' to international students. What teachers can concentrate on instead is creating purposeful learner-centred academic and linguistic activities to consolidate and reinforce students' experiences and this can be done through project-based work that is formally assessed. A stroll through the Freshers' Fair at Kent this week convinced me that I am probably not best placed to create social activities for students.

The potential of problem-based learning in IFPs and pre-sessional courses

About the author



Maxine Gillway

Coordinator EFL and Foundation Studies,
Language Centre,
University of Bristol

'It is not a Socratic or discovery process where learners have to discover the right answer.'

Problem-based learning began in a Canadian medical faculty in the 1960s and may now be familiar to professionals in many disciplines. It refers to a student-centred approach to learning which involves students working in small groups to tackle a 'messy', open-ended problem. In most higher education institutions, it is used to encourage students to discover and apply knowledge in one particular discipline. In IFPs, it may be adapted to focus on learning how to learn the academic skills that will be needed in a UK university without having to deal with demotivating texts that are above their language level.

Introduction

One concern for international foundation and pre-sessional programmes is the increasing number of students with a lower entry level of English and the challenges presented in terms of sustaining motivation and finding intellectually appropriate material at the right level. Problem-Based Learning has been used to successfully address a similar situation in a UAE university with learners below 4.5 on IELTS (Gillway & Bielenberg, 2006) and has been piloted as part of a module in English for Academic Studies at a UK university.

Problem-Based Learning defined

Research began on Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in the medical faculty at McMaster University, Canada, in the 1960s (Barrows, 1985). Based on the principles of constructivism, it refers to a student-centred approach to learning which involves students working in small groups to tackle a 'messy', open-ended problem. The process begins with the group analysing the problem to establish what they know, what they need to know and how they can find that out. They then allocate responsibilities among the group and each individual member carries out their assigned task outside of the classroom before coming back to the group to share their new knowledge and apply it to the problem. The group then re-conceptualizes the problem in the light of new knowledge and eventually comes up with potential solutions. These solutions are then presented and justified to a larger audience.

Unlike a traditional project or case study, which is usually designed to consolidate

knowledge and demonstrate the relevance of what has already been taught, PBL is inductive in that it begins with the presentation of a real world scenario from which knowledge is generated. It is not a Socratic or discovery process where learners have to discover the right answer. They generate their own learning issues - which will match the syllabus if the problems are well-designed.

The advantages of PBL

As the concept of PBL has spread beyond medical faculties, numerous studies have illustrated its potential to engage students and improve learning. PBL has been shown to help students take more responsibility for their learning (Kirkgoz, 2005), improve cognitive skills (Chrispeel and Martin, 1998), become more motivated (McKinnon, 1999), develop valuable social skills (Lieux, 1996), and learn more about themselves (Evensen, Salisbury-Glennon & Glenn, 2001). Important in PBL is that learners have ownership, that the learning is anchored to a larger task and that learners are challenged. It certainly served to motivate our low-level IFP students with 19 out of 23 finding it 'interesting', all 23 'challenging' and all but one 'useful' in their end of course evaluation. This contrasts with the lecture and note-taking component of the course which only ten of the 23 found 'interesting', 11 'challenging' and 11 'useful'. Interestingly, the one group which struggled with the PBL experience had arrived late and so missed the chance to choose their own problem scenario group - thus, the key element of ownership was missing throughout.

The Challenges

The problem design

The nature of the problem is key to the success of any PBL experience. A good problem should be relevant to the students' experience, current, complex, and open-ended. The most popular and successful scenarios used in the recent pilot were the improvement of the international student orientation programme, and the design of a new Language Centre for the University – both problems that appealed to our mixed group of post- and under-graduate students from a range of disciplines. The one problem that was slightly farther removed from the students' own experience – the effect of the current economic situation on a local institution – was only chosen by one group, who decided to focus on the local city council, and was less successful. This problem may work well, however, with students preparing for an Economics degree. For many disciplines problem banks may be found online. Good examples of these include Physics and Astronomy (University of Leicester, 2006). When engaged in these subject area problems, the focus may be on learning content. In an IFP we can shift the focus to learning about the metacognitive processes of learning.

In the pilot course, students investigate the current situation, identify the problems and come up with justifiable solutions based on their findings. This feeds into a 'Situation, Problem, Solution, Evaluation' report which is built up gradually in a portfolio. The advantage of this technique over the traditional research project is that the students can become familiar with the research process without having to engage with dense academic texts. Most of their data can be gathered from oral sources through interview and survey or from websites. Students identify learning issues such as how to write emails to arrange interviews, design questionnaires, describe process, refer to data, analyse cause and effect, use sources, and so on. The teacher can then provide more traditional input sessions on these subjects, since the learners have identified these needs and see an immediate as well as longer term relevance. Throughout the process, students are encouraged to reflect on their performance with regular structured self, peer, and group evaluations.

The role of the teacher

In PBL the teacher must become the 'guide by the side' rather than the 'sage on the stage'. As facilitator, the teacher is there to model various methods of problem-solving and ask probing questions about the process the group is following. The temptation, of course, is to fall back into the role of knowledge provider. This change in role can be frustrating and teachers will need support.

The role of the student

Similarly, the role of active, independent and collaborative learner may be new to many international students. The temptation is for them to search for

the answer the teacher wants. It is useful to provide orientation material to clarify the principles and procedures before the process begins and to reassure them that any solution is acceptable, provided that it is well justified.

Conclusion

The aim of international foundation programmes is to prepare students for the demands of academic study in English. PBL has much to offer. Carefully designed problems not only help to motivate and engage students, but the meaning-focused interactions will benefit them linguistically and they will make a variety of connections often missing from traditional courses. This includes connections:

- to the real world
- to the local community
- between participants
- to the knowledge, skills and dispositions that will be needed for success in a UK university and beyond

Barrows, H. E. (1985). *How to design a problem-based curriculum for the preclinical years*, New York: Springer.

Chrispeels, J. H., & Martin, K. J. (1998). Becoming Problem Solvers: The Case of Three Future Administrators. *Journal of School Leadership*, 8, pp. 303–331.

Evensen, D. H., Slaisbury-Glennon, J. D., & Glenn, J. (2001). A Qualitative Study of Six Medical Students in a Problem-Based Curriculum: Toward a Situated Model of Self-Regulation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(4), pp. 659–676.

Gillway, M. & Bielenberg, B. (2006). Adapting Problem-Based Learning for the First-Year Experience *UGRU Journal* Volume 3, Fall 2006 available at http://www.ugruenglish.uaeu.ac.ae/UGRUJournal/UGRUJournal_files/cr3/PBL.pdf (accessed 23/1/09).

Kirkgoz, Y. (2005) Evaluating the Effectiveness of Problem-based Learning Tasks available at http://www.tb.lt.org/publication_proceedings.htm (accessed 23/1/09).

Lieux, E. M. (1996). A Comparative Study of Learning in Lecture Vs. Problem-Based Format. *About Teaching - #50. A Newsletter of the Center for Teaching Effectiveness*, Spring 1996, University of Delaware available at <http://www.udel.edu/pbl/cte/spr96-nutr.html> (accessed 23/1/09).

MacKinnon, M. M. (1999). CORE Elements of Student Motivation in Problem-Based learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 78, pp. 49–58, Summer 1999.

University of Leicester (2006). Problem-Based Learning in Astronomy and Physics available at <http://www.le.ac.uk/leap/> (accessed 04/09/09).

'In PBL the teacher must become the "guide by the side" rather than the "sage on the stage"':

Cross-curricular collaboration through the IFP

About the author



Anthony Manning
Assistant Director,
International Study and
Language Centre,
University of Reading

‘... the IFP can represent a very useful environment for developing and running purposeful and successful collaborative projects.’

Internal politics and perceptions of status imbalances have been quoted as reasons why cross-curricular collaboration is not always successful amongst language and content teaching professionals in higher education. In support of the potential benefits which can be harnessed through inter-disciplinary collaboration on international foundation programmes, this article highlights the common features of some IFPs which the author believes can be capitalised upon in order to facilitate dynamic peer collaboration across the curriculum. Examples of a number of collaborative projects from the IFP at the University of Reading are also provided.

Introduction

The structure of any university-based international foundation programme necessitates the establishment of key organisational and academic links across university departments and their administration. In addition, the breadth of the IFP curriculum and the diversity offered by both participating departments and the student body can represent an extensive resource with a wealth of applications in terms of teaching methodology, policy and course delivery.

Although undertaking ongoing successful collaborative ventures is not always straightforward, this article will argue that the IFP can represent a very useful environment for developing and running purposeful and successful collaborative projects. Examples of a series of ventures which have taken advantage of the IFP collaborative environment at the University of Reading will also be presented.

Collaborating across the curriculum – some key considerations

In describing teaching and learning ventures, involving both content and language tutors, Benesch (2001, p.36) refers to the prevalence of ‘a lack of reciprocity’ and indicates that most ‘collaborative’ work on combined language and content courses is actually situated towards the lower end of Barron’s (1992, p.1) cooperative continuum:

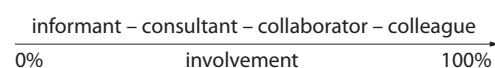


Figure 1: Co-operative teaching ventures (Barron, 1992, p.1)

Power imbalances amongst key stakeholders, in particular the potential relegation of language teachers to the position of non-expert in the process of interdisciplinary partnerships, have also been referred to by researchers such as Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002, p.6), Bool & Luford (1999, p.29–35) and Raimes (1991, p.243), who first described this form of insubordination as ‘the butler’s stance’.

In contrast, more constructively, Tajino et al. (2005) recommend engineering meaningful collaboration which recognizes the equal value of both content and language tutors. Furthermore, Hyland (2006, p.187), with reference to Barron (2003), indicates that in order to encourage dynamic collaboration amongst peers, which is free from preconception, it is important to acknowledge the diverse philosophical backgrounds of participants who represent varying disciplines with often different organisational, methodological and cultural backgrounds.

The IFP as a key source of collaborative potential

Whilst it would be both naive and ill-informed to suggest that all IFPs are structured and staffed in such a way as to allow ideal streams of intercommunication and cross fertilisation, it could, nevertheless, be argued that the IFP structure can often be harnessed in order to provide a means of fostering a dynamic form of collaboration amongst peers, as described above by Hyland (2006) and Barron (2003). Some common or shared features across the range of provision in the IFP sector highlights the existing or potential means of dynamic collaboration which are often available to a greater or lesser extent.

- IFP modules are often designed in and managed from within faculties and departments across the institution, thus creating opportunities for the development of a programme specification which comprises methodologies and approaches grounded in a range of disciplines and philosophies.
- Innovation and advancement are often facilitated as new developments can be channelled to the IFP via multiple routes, established by teaching and learning colleagues located in numerous faculties and departments.
- Representation on IFP committees and Boards of Studies is usually indicative of

‘... this often engenders a dynamic shared interest amongst tutors, who share the same goal of teaching a single cohort of international students that is comprised of both culturally and educationally diverse individuals.’

the curriculum breadth and the varied stakeholders across the University. This can provide a rich diversity of institution-wide input to inform the development and implementation of policies and procedures.

- IFP students are simultaneously multifarious in nature and yet collectively idiosyncratic in their shared ‘international’ status. Irrespective of the intended academic discipline, this often engenders a dynamic shared interest amongst tutors who share the same goal of teaching a single cohort of international students that is comprised of both culturally and educationally diverse individuals. This also seems to lead to a heightened peer identity amongst IFP tutors of very different subjects.
- IFPs often benefit from a cross curricular team of external examiners who are able to review and scrutinise teaching and assessment procedures for a single programme, whilst bearing in mind a range of different subject-specific philosophies.

Examples of collaboration at the University of Reading IFP

The examples that follow have been selected in order to highlight the means by which the IFP at the University of Reading has endeavoured to harness the naturally occurring collaborative teaching and learning environment that has emerged from the Programme’s infrastructure and collaborative ethos. The examples also illustrate the mechanism through which this shared collaborative focus is maintained and developed:

Developing grading criteria and module specifications

Through working groups and board meetings, grading criteria have been negotiated, developed and trialled with colleagues from across the curriculum. These criteria have been created in such a way as to meet requirements at programme level, whilst differentiating according to Science, Social Science or English Language curricula.

Undertaking cross-curricular peer observations

Tutors have the opportunity to observe teaching practice in an IFP subject area of their choice in order to learn from peers in different curriculum areas. To vary the procedure over subsequent years tutors are also encouraged to share good practice on assessment or material design.

Participating in interdisciplinary continuing professional development (CPD)

Regular CPD sessions are organised according to cross curricular IFP needs. Peer tutors from different subject areas are brought together in order to share approaches and experiences of teaching and learning in the IFP context.

Teaching academic skills

Tutors from different discipline areas teach the academic skills module and contribute to its syllabus development and assessment. This recognises that the paradigm which underpins this area of teaching and learning should not be constructed solely by language tutors.

Writing teaching materials and textbooks

Teaching materials designed for use on IFP programmes have been jointly designed and created by both language

and content tutors in order to incorporate the needs of both international students and their tutors. The Transferable Academic Skills Kit (Manning and Nukui et al, 2007) is an example of this.

Developing policies and procedures

Collaborative consultation with IFP tutors and teaching and learning directors in schools and faculties across the University has led to both the adoption and rejection of IFP policy in accordance with informed experience, wider University perspectives and alternative views on appropriate procedure. In particular, crucial final decisions with regard to attendance policy have been informed through this mechanism.

Conclusion

Pedagogical collaboration and the roles of participants need to be carefully planned and considered regardless of the context in which collaboration takes place, if multiple views, aspects and solutions are to be considered (Gray, 1989, p.5). Nevertheless, this article suggests that the IFP teaching and learning context can often provide a viable forum to exploit the fertile resource which is created when peer tutors from across the IFP curriculum work together on such interdisciplinary programmes. Although it may not always be the case, it is likely that some of the structural features common to IFPs and their operation will bring together at least some tutors from different disciplines who are interested in working jointly together as peers on teaching and learning enhancement projects. As a result, some of the status and philosophical barriers which may be more difficult to overcome in other situations can be obviated. It would be particularly interesting to hear of other successful instances of cross-curricular collaboration at other institutions in the next issue of *InForm*.

- Barron, C.** (1992). Cultural syntonicity: Co-operative relationships between the ESP unit and other departments. *Hong Kong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching*, 15, 1–14.
- Barron, C.** (2003). Problem-solving and EAP: Themes and issues in a collaborative teaching venture. *English for Specific Purposes*, 3(22), 297–314.
- Benesch, S.** (2001). *Critical English for Academic Purposes: Theory, politics, and practice*. Mahwah, N.J.; London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bool, H., & Luford, P.** (1999). *Academic standards and expectations: The role of EAP*. Nottingham: Nottingham University Press.
- Gray, B.** (1989). *Collaborating: finding common ground for multiparty problems*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hyland, K.** (2006). *English for Academic Purposes: An advanced resource book*. London: Routledge.
- Hyland, K., & Hamp-Lyons, L.** (2002). EAP: Issues and directions. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 1, 1–22.
- Manning, A and Nukui, C.G et al.** (2007). *Transferable Academic Skills Kit*. Reading, Garnet Publishing.
- Raimes, A.** (1991). Out of the woods: Emerging traditions in the teaching of writing. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(3), 407–430.
- Tajino, A., James, R., & Kijima, K.** (2005). Beyond needs analysis: Soft systems methodology for meaningful collaboration in EAP course design. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 4, 27–42.

Teacher development/ learner development: the role of reflective practice

About the author



Darren Elliott
Language Instructor,
Nanzan University, Japan

'... the need for critical reflection is especially important when it comes to foundation programme students, some of whom may come from pedagogical cultures which have different expectations.'

Despite formalised professional development programmes or informal teacher-led activities, the ongoing process of professional growth can be a lonely one. This can be especially true for teachers on international foundation programmes, who may be working on a part-time basis or situated in different departments across an institution. The act of teaching itself takes place in isolation, and it can be very difficult to view our own performance objectively. Critical reflection is one method of maintaining momentum in a demanding profession.

What?

Reflective practice is an established methodology, used by professionals across disciplines as both a training and development tool. Reflective practice is especially suited to working contexts which involve complex human interaction and strong emotions, such as medicine, social work and education. It is a goal, or a philosophy, and, as such, the practitioner can and should design their own pathway. In this way it fits well with the curriculum diversity which often characterises the IFP.

Schon (1987) identified three reflective processes, which interplay to different degrees depending, for example, on the experience of the teacher. Reflection-in-action represents the decisions we make during a class. Reflection-on-action is a more considered contemplation of an experience after the fact, the point at which we attempt to fit the new discoveries into our mental framework. In time, these processes may lead to knowing-in-action; the ability to make effective decisions automatically. These processes are not linear, and the expert, experienced teacher may often be confronted with a situation which prompts a reassessment of practice. Clearly, the teaching context presented by different IFP subject areas and teaching situations will also play a key role.

Why?

In his fascinating and ambitious study *The Lives of Teachers* (1993) Huberman concluded that career trajectory could take many directions, towards disenchantment or self-realization, through doubt or positive experimentation.

Although this can be influenced by external factors over which teachers have little control, such as institutional or national policies, Huberman emphasized the teacher's personal responsibility for those aspects of our work over which we do have some authority.

'Putting it unkindly, while the principle task of professional educators is to guide (students) in the course of their development, it seems that they, themselves, do not have the inclination to reflect on his or her own situation and their own professional future.' (1993, p.262)

In the twenty years since the project, increased interest in reflection has led to changes in initial and early teacher education, but it is worth reminding ourselves that experience is no guarantee of expertise, and that a continued commitment to teacher development is instrumental in maintaining interest and avoiding burnout (Woodward, 1991, p.147, Farrell, 2007, p.3). It would be interesting to find out how many international foundation programmes do already provide tailored professional development courses for their staff.

What is also interesting is the link that Huberman makes between the teachers own reflection, and that of his/her students. To employ an aphorism, we ought to 'practice what we preach'. Highlighting the need for critical reflection is especially important when it comes to foundation programme students, some of whom may come from pedagogical cultures which have different expectations. What we need to do is ensure our students understand what is expected of them. Little (1995) makes a case for the interdependence of teacher and learner autonomy thus;

‘... successful learners have always been autonomous ... Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of ... control of the teaching process.’ (1995, p.179).

‘As teachers, we plan carefully towards clear goals. However, we can sometimes forget that the students are not a part of this planning progress.’

Teachers without a firm grounding and a belief in reflective practice, not just at a theoretical level but also at an experiential one, will find it very difficult to help their students towards learner responsibility.

How?

There are a number of techniques which can be adapted by both IFP teachers and learners to facilitate reflection. In order to be successful over time, however, I would like to stress two key points.

1. Routine is the enemy of reflection.

If reflection is questioning, what questions should we ask? Early in our teaching careers, we are often concerned with classroom management and other ‘skills’. We are likely to analyse the superficial (What happened?) without attending to the beliefs or issues which cause situations (Why did that happen?). This can lead to a further problems.

- i the learning process becomes stale, and solutions to problems stagnate (Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005).
- ii the focus on critical incidents does not promote holistic learning, leading to reflection on each situation as a distinct occurrence rather than as a part of a pattern.
- iii reflection on problem solving is negative; it is more positive to picture an ideal and work towards it.

Both teacher and learner need to find ways of asking themselves new questions and somehow ‘breaking the cycle’. Perhaps the best way of finding a new perspective is by having others pose the questions.

2. Reflection is not a solitary pursuit

Although at the outset of this article I stated that teaching takes place in isolation, learning need not. Vygotsky’s (1978) ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ – a virtual space in which cooperative participants can achieve success in tasks beyond their individual ability – has experienced quite a renaissance in recent decades. If students commonly work together in pairs or groups, why does the teacher have to plough a lonely furrow? Perhaps there are opportunities for peer cooperation amongst IFP tutors which could be developed.

What? (Revisited)

With this in mind, what do you and your students need to do to really understand your own performance?

1. Journal Writing

Both teachers and students can benefit from keeping a journal; as a way of recording and processing new knowledge and ideas, to analyse values and experiences, to revisit and assess critical incidents, to reflect alone or

to interact with peers. Bolton (2005) is an excellent read for anyone considering writing as a tool for professional development, really emphasizing creative ways of finding new perspectives.

2. Time to reflect

As teachers, we plan carefully towards clear goals. However, we can sometimes forget that the students are not a part of this planning progress. It can be chastening to receive students feedback and realize that they don’t know what they studied, let alone why they studied it. Incorporating reflection into each lesson not only consolidates learning, but also enables the teacher to see where they need to be more explicit, and offers the learner the chance to take ownership of new knowledge and feel a part of the process. It is important, however, to change the nature of this reflection throughout the course; I found that students lost their initial enthusiasm and stopped thinking as deeply after a few weeks. Recently, I have switched the reflection questions and tried combinations of written, oral, individual and pair work. When making time to reflect on teaching, the teacher should do the same.

3. Peer Assessment

Depending on how this is approached, students can be encouraged to make connections between what they are doing in class and abstract notions of ‘learning’. The teacher can focus on certain areas, and (pragmatically) the process can assist us in grading, especially with larger classes. For teachers, this can take the form of teacher development groups or observation. Each requires sensitivity and diplomacy from participants, and it is best to set goals and ground rules in advance. I recommend Farrell (2007) for good practice guidelines.

Conclusion

Thinking about what we do, as teachers or as learners, is a vital component of development. I hope this article has given you some ideas of how and why you can bring this practice into your own classrooms

Borg, Farrell, T.S.C. (2007). *Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice*. London: Continuum.

Huberman, M. (1993). *The Lives of Teachers*. (Neufeld, J., Trans.). London: Cassell. (Original work published 1989).

Korthagen, F. & Vasalos, A. (2005). Levels in reflection: core reflection as a means to enhance professional growth. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 11 (1), 47–71.

Little, D. (1995). Learning as Dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System*, 23/2, 175–181.

Shon, D. A. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher mental processes*. (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Woodward, T. (1991). *Models and Metaphors in Language Teacher Training: Loop input and other strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laying the foundations for discipline-specific writing skills

About the author



Dr Alexander Martin Baratta
Associate Lecturer,
Manchester Metropolitan University

‘Though the literature recognises the importance of discipline-specific writing conventions (Biber, 1988; MacDonald, 1994; Gimenez, 2008), this focus has arguably not made its way, on any appreciable level, to the actual writing classroom.’

Like all university students, those enrolled on international foundation programmes need to learn academic writing skills in order to progress in this area, which is arguably the main tool of academic assessment. However, there exists a need to teach students not just the more general points regarding academic writing, but also the discipline-specific conventions. The international foundation programme is ideal for this dual pedagogical purpose, as its very nature is to prepare students for the future demands of their subject; therefore, it is argued that the teaching of discipline-specific academic writing conventions is an integral part of this academic preparation.

Academic writing provision in the United Kingdom

Gimenez (2008, p.151) declares that ‘academic writing has long been recognised as an essential skill university students need to master’, further stating that many students are expected to have already reached this goal by the time they start university. While the United Kingdom does not have a national writing class for university students (such as the *Freshman Composition* class in the USA), there is nonetheless writing instruction offered. Universities generally provide writing workshops for students, offering assistance with essays in progress and there are indeed writing classes (though largely for non-native speakers of English), either offered as part of summer school pre-session programmes or within the foundation year itself (e.g. English for Academic Purposes). Therefore, academic writing has been recognised as a valuable part of overall learning, with Ivancic (1998) declaring that the *Freshman Composition* class is becoming the basis for the theory and research of academic writing in the United Kingdom.

The need for discipline-specific writing instruction

Though the literature recognises the importance of discipline-specific writing conventions (Biber, 1988; MacDonald, 1994; Gimenez, 2008), this focus has arguably not made its way, on any appreciable level, to the actual writing classroom. Gimenez (2008, p.152) argues that ‘writing lecturers appear to focus on the basic principles of writing’, such as structuring and referencing, thus ignoring features of writing which are specific to individual disciplines. Woodward-Kron (2004, p.140) offers an implication for this generic approach, stating that it could lead to ‘mak-

ing connections and generalizations about student writing that may be inaccurate and misleading for specific disciplinary contexts’.

This article therefore argues that the foundation year can be ideally positioned to review the basics of academic writing, while simultaneously providing students with the necessary information as to what constitutes proficient writing within their own discipline. As the foundation year programme is designed to give students a foundation of knowledge within their chosen field of study, then it might also serve to give students the specific knowledge they will need for academic writing within their discipline.

Generic aspects of academic writing

The aforementioned generic approach taken to academic writing is, however, necessary to an extent. Academic writing from any discipline, whether Psychology, Chemistry or Engineering, will arguably display a certain sameness; hence, a justification to first give students an overview of the basics, such as maintaining a consistent focus within essays; subdividing the topics in a coherent manner; avoiding a mere description of the subject; and using Standard English grammar. There is perhaps little, if any, doubt, therefore, as to the need for students from all disciplines to first understand features which are universal to academic writing *in toto*, before progressing to discipline-specific writing conventions.

Discipline-specific features of academic writing

Based on the literature, there are features of academic writing that determine on a more discipline-specific level what constitutes ‘good’ writing. Gimenez (2008) suggests making students aware of what the main types of

essays are that they will be expected to write within their discipline, such as reflective essays, case studies or article reviews. This can in turn provide clues as to the expected rhetorical function of their essays (e.g. to argue) and linguistic features necessary (e.g. passive voice).

Additional information regarding discipline-specific writing conventions, both broad and narrow, is now presented:

- The research of Hyland (2000) reveals that disciplines in the Social Sciences tend to hedge more than disciplines in the hard sciences.
- The research of MacDonald (1994) reveals that the Social Sciences also rely less on nominalisations, in favour of a more personal tone.
- Biber (1988) and MacDonald (1994) regard the hard sciences as being noted for a prominent nominalisation and passive use.
- According to the Driscoll (2008), 'Literary devices such as metaphors, alliteration, or anecdotes are not appropriate for writing in Psychology'.

Furthermore, there is conflicting advice within the literature as to how personal academic writing should or should not be, seen through the use of the first person. Lester (1993, p.144) references, and concurs with, pedagogic directives to 'write your paper with a third person voice that avoids "I believe" or "it is my opinion"'. Arnaudet and Barrett (1984, p.73) state that 'academic writing aims at being "objective" in its expression of ideas, and thus tries to avoid specific reference to personal pronouns ... your academic writing should indicate this style by eliminating first person pronouns'.

Ivanic (1998, p.529), however, suggests that the first person is the 'most powerful authorial presence', declaring that it is a linguistic means by which students take responsibility for their ideas, rather than a means to be overly subjective. Furthermore, Clark (1992, p.136) concurs that students should 'take responsibility for their ideas by using I and other personal expressions'.

The conflicting information within the literature is arguably reflective of the situation within the classroom, in that many students today are still unsure whether they can use first person within their essays. It is not sufficient to give a 'yes' or a 'no' to their enquiries; instead, armed with our own knowledge of writing conventions within the discipline, we can be better prepared to give not only a definite answer, but also perhaps explain the reasons why.

Essay analysis as a generic-specific teaching approach

As foundation year lecturers have a wealth of information regarding their field, then it is suggested that within one of their given courses, a proposed generic-specific teaching approach to academic writing can be adopted. Even for those students who have not been instructed in academic writing in the first instance, the pedagogical approach discussed here allows for a review of the basics, while alerting students to the spe-

cific writing conventions of their discipline. Essentially, allowing students the chance to analyse completed academic essays within their discipline allows them to see what constitutes good essay writing. The analysis culminates in a group discussion, with students then awarding a score (the actual score is provided at the end of class by the lecturer). Essay analysis is hardly a new approach, but if it is used with an eye cast specifically on discussing how both the basics of essay writing in general *and* within the discipline are met, then students can come away with a stronger understanding of what will be expected of them in their future essays. This approach need not be a burden for lecturers, as it can be used as a supplement within their particular foundation year class. Ideally, students can analyse the sample essay in conjunction with a scoring sheet, with which to determine if the essay has achieved the generic goals (e.g. maintaining a consistent focus), while the lecturer alerts students in the follow-up discussion to the essay's features which are standard within the students' discipline (but perhaps not in other disciplines).

Conclusion

This article has argued for the need to give students necessary knowledge of how to write proficient academic essays from a twofold perspective – generic and specific. It has not presumed that this approach is not already used within the foundation year programme, but it is suggested that such an approach might be considered on a wider level, by using what is already a common teaching method: essay analysis.

- Borg, Farrell, T.S.C.** (2007). Arnaudet, M. and M.E. Barrett. (1984). *Approaches to Academic Reading and Writing*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Biber, D.** (1988). *Variation across Speech and Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, R.** (1992). Principles and Practice of CLA in the Classroom. *Critical Language Awareness*. Ed. Norman Fairclough. London: Longman.
- Driscoll, D.** (2008). The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL). 'Writing in Psychology: Experimental Report Writing.' September 27th 2007. PurdueUniversity. Accessed on 21 May 2009. <<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/670/01/>>
- Gimenez, J.** (2008). Beyond the Academic Essay: Discipline-Specific Writing in Nursing and Midwifery. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7(3), 151–164.
- Hyland, K.** (2000). *Disciplinary Discourses – Social Interactions in Academic Writing*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.
- Ivanic, R.** (1998). *Writing and Identity*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Lester, J.** (1993). *Writing Research Papers*. New York: Harper Collins.
- MacDonald, S.** (1994). *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Woodward-Kron, R.** (2004). 'Discourse Communities' and 'Writing Apprenticeship': An Investigation of these Concepts in Undergraduate Education Students' Writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 3(2),139–161.

'This approach need not be a burden for lecturers, as it can be used as a supplement within their particular foundation year class.'

A question of knowledge: academic reliability in the information age

About the author



John Lake
Language teacher,
International Foundation Courses
and English Language Studies,
SOAS

'With at least as many pages as the number of living people on earth, the web looks like the ultimate information treasure trove.'

The pitfalls of students' reliance on the internet previously discussed by Kinakh (2008) and Murphy (2009) are part of older and wider concerns about academic reliability and the nature of knowledge itself. This article looks at the situation from students' and tutors' points of view and suggests some further approaches for international foundation programmes (IFPs).

Cognitive authority

Issues surrounding IFP students' reliance on and use of electronic resources have been raised in two previous issues of *InForm*. Beginning from the standpoint of agreement with Murphy (2009, p.3) that 'it is not possible to hold back the tide of the internet', there is an argument that the problems of plagiarism and academic reliability (Kinakh, 2008, p.15) belong to a wider domain than that encompassed by just electronic resources.

The history of research, comment and debate by academics and professionals such as bankers and librarians is as old as public use of the internet itself, with key papers going back to Olaisen (1990) and Schamber (1991), but the problem of cognitive authority goes back further and embraces not just electronic but also conventional publishing (Wilson, 1983; Herring, 2001). As Herring points out, among university library collections, '[some] publications ... are assumed to be of high quality, while others are approached with doubt or even disdain'. In the Information Age, when in most parts of the world any topic can be researched with a few clicks of the mouse, it is impossible not to encounter multiple viewpoints, and not just contradictory *opinions*, which are expected as the basis of western academic discourse, but also contradictory *facts*, much of this in pursuit of commercial and ideological goals. The question, in such an information-rich environment, becomes more than just about reliability; it is about the nature of knowledge itself. Pluto is no longer classed as a planet, but for how many years will we continue to say that the Solar System has nine planets? Science and rationality tell us that knowledge is defined as

currently known facts, but in the e-networked environment that we now regularly inhabit, it may be that knowledge is becoming redefined as *information traded*. In the academic context, this represents a clear danger.

The situation for students

Factors influencing whether a student will go to the library or the web first for source material (D'Esposito and Gardner, 1999) include two which still seem relevant. One is time, which by implication includes locale: it is faster for a student to access information on the web from home than waiting until they get to the library. The second is instruction given to students by teachers and lecturers. An additional factor can be the competition for library books, a situation that may differ widely according to institutions' resource levels. And, in the current era, accessing information from the web is second nature to people in their late teens or early twenties, whereas going to the library might be third, fourth or tenth nature. With at least as many pages as the number of living people on earth, the web looks like the ultimate information treasure trove.

The concerns and challenges for foundation tutors

Of foremost concern to academic internet users are the credibility, authority, truthfulness and accuracy of website material, as well as the currency of its content (Rieh & Belkin, 1998). According to Herring's study, the level of concern among university faculty members varies, with some accepting web sources for undergraduate assignments but not for 'real research', others emphasising the need to

double-check everything off the web and others still pointing out the web's incompatibility with 'academic social norms', such as the peer-review process. The validity of these concerns may be additionally justified by D'Esposito and Gardner's finding that many students consider sites produced by government, businesses and corporations as reputable.

Much internet use by IFP students, particularly those living in a foreign culture, is of a fact-finding nature, the web as a glorified encyclopedia. Sites such as Wikipedia post their own warnings about reliability, but these can often go overlooked, so there is a clear need to inculcate students' ability to distinguish between academic opinion and commercial or political persuasion. The hierarchy of sites generated by search engines is another matter to be approached cautiously, those at the top of the list not necessarily being the most authoritative (Stapleton, 2005, p.137). Finally, there is the question of what kind of texts students are accessing. News, for instance, can provide information that may be relevant to academic interests but its discourse style runs contrary to the students' needs for good academic writing models (Morton, 1999, p.179).

Some suggestions

If IFP tutors are to lead by example, one thing they should do is curb their own use of non-academic web pages in their teaching material. It seems counter-productive to tell students to avoid Wikipedia, then base a handout or a language exercise around a Wikipedia text. Naturally, in the course of their reading around their subjects, students will come into contact with many different kinds of sources, not just ones published by academics, so it is right that they should be coached in the reading skills to deal with them. The point made by Morton is a valid one, nonetheless, and , along with those techniques such as sentence completion and grammar dictation endorsed by Murphy (2009), it is worth considering his suggestion of using academic abstracts, which can be exploited in a variety of ways to facilitate not just students' academic writing but their academic reading strategies as well. To this end, advanced search engines such as Google Scholar are ideally suited, providing free access to abstracts of articles that would normally have to be purchased separately in their full-text format. Online archives such as Athens and EBSCO, which most educational institutions running IFPs should be signed up to, are also excellent sources of material, and students should be encouraged to use these as their first port of call when travelling the web.

At the instructional level, tutors need to place special emphasis on the importance of attribution. This could cover not only the referencing conventions applicable to any citations, internet-based or otherwise, but also the provision of evaluation of a source's reliability where necessary, which can be taught as an added level of qualification in their essay writing. Material from sites whose purpose may be unclear or obviously non-

academic but nevertheless useful can thus be referred to tentatively, with the writer keeping an appropriate distance. The more students can be guided towards and steeped in the environment of academic discourse styles, however, the better for their own production.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, problems of authority and reliability are not unique to internet-based texts. The electronic dimension has nonetheless introduced a new set of issues, academic, technical and stylistic. Subsequently, IFPs have a major part to play in highlighting the pitfalls and challenges to future undergraduates.

- D'Esposito, J. E. & Gardner, R. M.** (1999). University Students' Perception of the Internet: an exploratory study. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 25(6), online.
- Herring, S. D.** (2001). Using the World Wide Web for Research: are faculty satisfied? *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 27(3), online.
- Kinakh, V.** (2008). Web Resources and the Hazards for IFP Students – can you help? *InForm*, (2), 15–16.
- Morton, R.** (1999). Abstracts as Authentic Material for EAP Classes. *ELT Journal*, 53(3), 177–182.
- Murphy, J.** (2009). Not Waving but Drowning ... in the Sea of the Internet. *InForm*, (3), 3–4.
- Olaisen, J. L.** (1990). Information Quality Factors and the Cognitive Authority of Electronic Information. In I. Wormell (ed.). *Information Quality: definitions and dimensions*. Los Angeles: Taylor Graham, 97–121.
- Rieh, S. Y. & Belkin, N. J.** (1998). Understanding Judgment of Information Quality and Cognitive Authority in the WWW. *Proceedings of the ASIS Annual Meeting*. Medford, NJ: Learned Information Inc., 279–289.
- Schamber, L.** (1991). Users' Criteria for Evaluation in a Multimedia Environment. *Proceedings of the ASIS Annual Meeting*. Medford, NJ: Learned Information Inc., 126–133.
- Stapleton, P.** (2005). Evaluating Web-sources: Internet literacy and L2 academic writing. *ELT Journal*, 59(2), 135–143.
- Wilson, P.** (1983). *Second-Hand Knowledge: an inquiry into cognitive authority*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press

'... there is a clear need to inculcate students' ability to distinguish between academic opinion and commercial or political persuasion.'

Information structure problems in IFY student writing

About the author



Thomas Hawes
Senior Teaching Fellow,
University of Leeds

‘... Theme is the start of the sentence, presented as given or at least retrievable information ... Rheme is the remainder of the sentence and it is presented as comment.’

IFY students’ essays are often confusing for readers due to their lack of awareness of information structure. Students may not know where they have gone wrong and teachers may not always see how to go about correcting the mistakes. This article looks at three common problem areas and suggests guidance, which is relevant to both IFY content and language teachers, based on theme-rheme principles to help students produce more coherent writing.

Introduction

IFY students come from diverse cultural backgrounds. They may be unfamiliar with the ways in which information can be structured in English and the rhetorical effects that can be achieved using particular choices available in the language. Students may therefore fail to appreciate the importance of appropriate structuring both for creating coherence and in moving a text forward. Moreover, they are unlikely to be sensitive to the differing meanings communicated by specific choices in their secondary source material unless they have a rudimentary knowledge of theme-rheme principles.

One vital factor in successful written communication is correct assessment of the key elements of information structure: what counts as theme and as rheme for a specific readership. Theme is the start of the sentence, presented as given or at least retrievable information. It is what the message will be about and its core element is generally the subject. Rheme is the remainder of the sentence and it is presented as comment. Its core element is the main verb. Writers must decide what to treat as ‘given’ for the reader and what they wish to say about this given information. Students have trouble deciding, or may not even think about this. Additionally, they find it difficult to structure sentences so as to reflect given and new information because the IFY may be their first contact with particular academic subjects.

Common information structure errors

An analysis of essays on different project topics for the English module assessment has identified a number of problem areas and it is believed that IFY students will face the same challenges in other content modules requiring extended writing.

Problem 1

The first recurrent issue is making clear to the reader the relationship between a theme and its surrounding text. An example, with the problem in bold, is:

Example 1

Therefore water has been privatised since the Ghanaian government had no alternative to provide people with clean pure water. The aim of water privatisation in Ghana was to provide the citizens with sufficient amount of drinkable water and to prevent people from [contracting] water born infections. **In addition the British Government and the World Bank have persuaded Ghana to do so.**

In the first two sentences, the writer suggests a reason for the Ghanaian government having decided to privatise its water supply. The third sentence then has, in addition, the British Government and the World Bank as its theme. Being in theme means this is presented as already given in the context. However, this is not the case because Ghana’s water crisis does not automatically imply any involvement of the British Government or the World Bank. The reader is puzzled as to how this information relates to what has gone before and has to deduce that the writer is in fact presenting this as an additional reason for privatisation by the Ghanaian government. This effort at comprehension would have been unnecessary if the student had made the relationship between the sentences clearer, e.g. by choosing as theme an additional reason for the government’s decision and presenting the British Government and the World Bank as ‘new’ material, in the rheme, producing a sentence such as: An additional reason for the government’s decision was pressure from the British Government and the World Bank.

'A sensible balance of progression types can help to avoid clumsiness and obscurity.'

Suggested area for teaching: A theme may be considered 'given' if it relates a) back to the theme of a previous sentence ('constant' thematic progression in Daneš, 1974), b) back to the rheme of the preceding sentence (Daneš' 'simple linear' progression), or c) to the overall topic of the essay (Daneš' 'derived' progression).

Problem 2

A second and related issue is insufficiently known and/or too much information in theme, i.e: the tendency to pack the theme with unfamiliar material or too many elements. This leaves the reader unclear as to what the writer is talking about or else makes a theme top-heavy. An example is:

Example 2

In response to the effects of the Korean food crisis, certain actions had to be taken. **However, because of accusations that North Korea's famine was a government choice as it has invested its income in military and nuclear activities, determining the most appropriate response** was the most challenging.

Having mentioned certain actions, sentence two touches on a specific response – the difficulty of determining it and the reasons why it was difficult. Here the theme ought to be determining the most appropriate response and the rheme should, along with the verb, contain the reasons why this was so, i.e: was most challenging because of accusations that ...

Suggested area for teaching: What the writer is talking about must be clear. Theme should include neither a) rhematic information nor b) too much information.

Problem 3

A further problem is students' failure to include a verb in rheme. An example of this, with * to denote a missing verb, is:

Example 3

Ghana has a food crisis because of several reasons. One reason, * growth in population. [An]other reason, * [chang]ing the use of land from farming to biofuel uses. Also debts which are increasing.

Suggested area for teaching: A grammatical sentence should include, minimally, a nominal group (typically theme or what the message is about) and a verb group (typically rheme or the message proper).

Conclusion

Despite some widespread linguistic-phobia, teachers of subjects across the curriculum may find that if they combine their existing knowledge and or feel for sentence grammar (e.g. subject-verb-object) with the mere basics of theme-rheme theory, as described in this article, they will be in a position to clarify many of their students' common difficulties with information structure. This is a strategy which could be used by language teachers and content teachers alike. The appropriate amount of theory will vary from class to class.

Nonetheless, looking at model examples and working through well-chosen texts to practise distinguishing theme from rheme and identifying the different progression strategies should give students the confidence to consider and to employ a variety of strategies.

A sensible balance of progression types can help to avoid clumsiness and obscurity. With 'constant' progression the writer's subject is clear, but the text will be boring to read if this is overused. 'Simple linear' is a good device to employ as a default strategy. 'Derived' progression is typical of academic writing, but renders a text obscure if themes are not sufficiently given. It is therefore suggested that students be encouraged to master 'constant' and 'simple linear' to begin with.

Daneš, F. (1974). 'Functional Sentence Perspective and the Organisation of the Text'. F. Daneš (ed) *Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective*. Prague: Academia 106–128.

Davies, F. (1990). 'Reading between the lines: thematic choice as a device for presenting writer viewpoint in academic discourse'. *ESpecialist* 9(1/2), 173–200.

Hawes, T. P. (2001). *Thematisation in the Editorials of The Sun and The Times* (Unpublished PhD Thesis), University of Liverpool.

Hawes, T. P. & Thomas, S. (1997). *Problems of Thematisation in Student Writing*. *RELC Journal*, Sermeo Regional Language Centre (Singapore) 28/2: 35–55.

Developing critical reading skills through the Interactive Whiteboard

About the author



Angela McLean

Assistant Head of Centre and Head of English, International Study Centre, University of Surrey

'The purpose of the IWB is to create student-centred learning and to help students gain confidence in developing their own ideas, an essential skill for critical thinking.'

Critical reading and thinking is a requirement of students to produce quality academic work. The challenge for the International Study Centre is to incorporate these skills into the framework of the Foundation English Skills syllabus. This article outlines some of the skills students need to acquire to become critical thinkers and presents the Interactive Whiteboard as one approach that seeks to address this skill. The article then concludes with some feedback from students regarding this technological approach.

Introduction

Past experience has shown that for our international students at the International Study Centre (ISC) to succeed on an undergraduate course at the University of Surrey they need to improve their reading and critical thinking skills. Generally speaking, students find reading texts critically challenging and this has impacted on their academic writing skills. The Interactive Whiteboard (IWB) has recently been incorporated as a useful method to help students improve their reading skills and meet the challenges of life at a British university.

Critical reading and thinking

Academic convention requires students to engage with the works of other scholars (Gavin et al, 1996). In my experience, this skill enables students to read between the lines of different texts and dig below the surface. This involves engaging in critical dialogue with the main themes and arguments in modules such as Business Studies and Economics. Students need to be encouraged to evaluate texts for these modules and to analyse them deeper. Cottrell (2005) argues that these skills come easier to some students than for others, and suggests students tend to accept the results and opinions of other people's work too readily. This can be observed at the ISC where, in particular, many of our Asian students tend to find text evaluation particularly difficult, especially when they first arrive. This process involves identifying differing people's positions, arguments and conclusions and, from these alternative points of views, drawing their own conclusions and eventual-

ly presenting a point of view (Cottrell, 2005). In order for students to arrive at judgements of this kind, they will need to be able to make inferences from what they have read.

To read more effectively students need to learn to interpret and be able to undertake activities of interpretation, inference and evaluation. This includes ensuring students have understood texts even where the author is being obscure or ambiguous. Furthermore, Wallace and Wray (2006) maintain that readers should be asking at every point if they have been given sufficient grounds for accepting the claims writers make and if these claims have been backed up by reasons based on some form of evidence.

Integrating the Interactive White Board (IWB) on the foundation programme

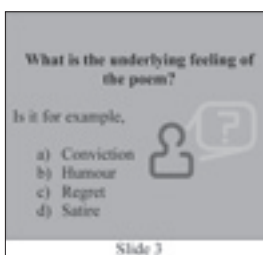
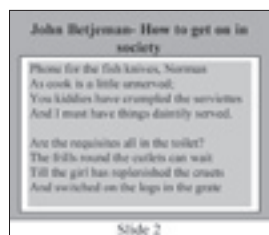
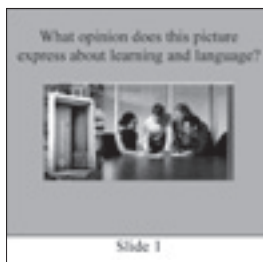
The purpose of the IWB is to create student-centred learning and to help students gain confidence in developing their own ideas, an essential skill for critical thinking. Students are encouraged to think critically and to share their ideas with others in the group. This is achieved by using concept-mapping software where the class can brainstorm together in an organised fashion. Throughout the lesson, students' ideas can be captured directly onto the IWB screen, complete with annotations, and can then be e-mailed or printed out and given to students. Students do not need to spend time copying notes from the board and can pay more attention to reading the texts they are given. The IWB can be connected to the computer where files can be highlighted, moved or opened and used in conjunction with a projector, for example,

with a PowerPoint presentation. It gives students an opportunity to use technology and, in addition, teachers can easily refer to examples on the screen which demonstrate answers to their questions.

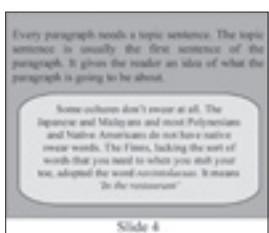
Examples of how to use the IWB

The following examples accompany the slides below and are some suggested IWB activities that can encourage critical thinking skills in the classroom.

Slide 1: By using an image students are introduced to the concept of evaluation through vocabulary elicitation, such as ‘relaxing’ and ‘communicative’, etc and why the image conveys this. The purpose is to foster the idea that the images have something to say, a skill which can be transferred to other areas.



Slides 2 and 3: Students are given verses to the poem *How to Get on in Society* by John Betjeman, which can be rearranged on the screen itself. The slide is linked to an MP3 file and the reordered poem can be checked as a listening exercise. This is then followed up with a multiple choice question to elicit the underlying feeling of the poem and to encourage students to read between the lines.



Slides 4 and 5: A short paragraph on ‘swearing’ introduces students to the difference between opinion and statement. The main purpose of this exercise is to focus students’ attention on the evidence that supports the topic sentence. This contrasts with the main text which is then given to them from a newspaper editorial where the writer expresses his opinion which is not necessarily factual.

Student feedback on the use of the IWB

Students’ comments were edited minimally in order to preserve the core meaning. The results of questionnaires found that:

- they find lessons using the IWB more interesting, easy to use and a more convenient way of teaching
- some felt the technology encouraged more interest in lessons and studying which resulted in a greater willingness to learn
- others commented the use of the IWB showed them the stages of a lesson more clearly and increased the standard of learning
- the IWB saves time and is familiar to the technologies students encounter in their daily life.

From my perspective, I have found students’ attention improved and was more focussed during the reading activities. Through the IWB I am able to help students identify key points in a text and steer them away from less important and distracting material. However, although students have responded positively to the use of the IWB as an aid, they concluded that teacher face-to-face contact is more important and ultimately learning can only really take place through teacher-student communication.

Conclusion

The use of IWB to support critical thinking is a particularly useful approach. Some students can have negative feelings towards making criticisms and this method helps to remove some barriers and lower anxiety. Although the above activities can be completed without an IWB, if you do have access to one it does seem to motivate students very effectively.

Cottrell, S. (2005). *Critical Thinking Skills*. Palgrave Macmillan

Fairbairn, G. and Winch, C. (1996). *Reading, Writing and Reasoning: A guide to students*. Buckingham (2nd ed). Open University Press.

Wallace, M. and Wray, A. (2006). *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates*. London. Sage



Register today for the

2010 *InForm* Conference

July 17, 2010

Please fill in the enclosed registration forms or download them directly from the *InForm* website

www.reading.ac.uk/inform

Call for papers

InForm is a journal of teaching and learning-related issues for members of the academic community associated with International Foundation Programmes, the fifth edition will be published in April 2010.

The submission of papers is now invited for the third edition of *InForm*, from tutors who represent a variety of academic disciplines commonly found within International Foundation Programmes. The third edition will be published in April 2009.

Full instructions for writers can be downloaded from the *InForm* website at the following address:
www.reading.ac.uk/inform

Writers are reminded that *InForm* is not predominantly an English language teaching journal.

Articles and letters should be sent by email to inform@reading.ac.uk by 12 noon on 31 January 2010.

Writers whose articles are published in *InForm* will receive a fee of £100. £50 will be paid for any letter which is published.



For further information, please contact:

Anthony Manning

+44 (0)118 378 7220

inform@reading.ac.uk

InForm

Issue 4 | October 2009

Editor Mr Anthony Manning

Editorial board

Dr Elena Bedisti, Mrs Amanda Fava-Verde,
Dr Prue Griffiths, Mr Anthony Manning,
Ms Clare Nukui, Dr Graham Van Wyk

Design

Designed in house by the
Design & Print Studio

Printers Advent Colour, Andover

InForm is published by the International
Study and Language Centre,
University of Reading.

For further information concerning any of
the articles in this issue, please contact:

The Editor, *InForm*,
International Study and Language Centre,
University of Reading,
Whiteknights, PO Box 217,
Reading, RG6 6AH
Tel +44(0)118 378 7220
Fax +44(0)118 378 6279
Email a.manning@reading.ac.uk
www.reading.ac.uk/inform

No part of *InForm* may be reproduced
without the prior permission of the pub-
lisher. Whilst every care has been taken to
ensure the accuracy of editorial content, no
responsibility can be taken for any errors
and/or omissions. The views expressed
in *InForm* are not necessarily those of the
University of Reading, the Editor or the
Editorial Board. All rights reserved.