

## **Write in the Mix: an investigation of language aspects of student academic writing**

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### **Overview**

In this study, we gathered data from a cohort of undergraduate student volunteers over a semester. The cohort was made up mainly of second language speakers with a small proportion of native speakers of English. We wanted to investigate a specific difficulty that we had perceived in students' academic writing and from the results of this investigation to design remedies. Our research propositions were as follows:

Students have difficulty in integrating their reading into their academic writing because:

- Proposition 1: they have insufficient command of English language to summarise or paraphrase effectively
- Proposition 2: they are unfamiliar with the conventions of summary writing.
- Proposition 3: they lack the critical thinking skills necessary to select relevant content

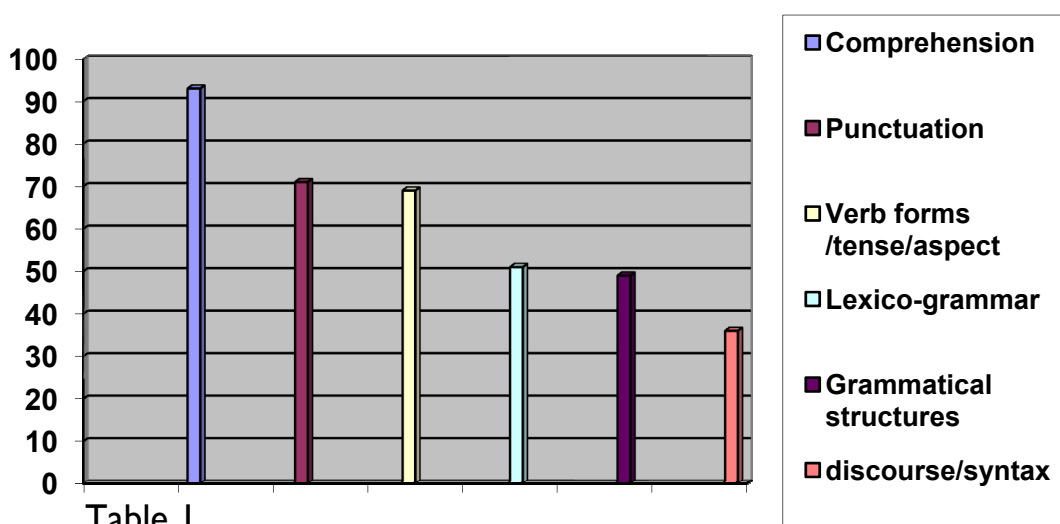
In order to test our propositions with the cohort we designed a diagnostic language test and two summary writing tasks which would be prompted by subject based texts. We discussed the content of our texts with a volunteer panel of subject area experts (SAEs) who were drawn from the business science, arts and law departments in the university. The purpose of the language test was to discover the students' base knowledge of English grammar and structure which would inform our evaluation of Proposition 1. In Task 1, which followed, we asked the students to select key information from a reading text in one of four academic areas and to summarise it. In Task 2 we asked them to formulate their own responses to questions regarding the text they had read.

From our findings we discovered that, as per our Proposition 1, it could be true that our cohort lacked sufficient command of the language in order to summarise effectively and, in support of Proposition 2, that they did not understand the

academic conventions of summary writing. We also found that the students were unfamiliar with the conventions of academic texts and thus had problems in responding appropriately to them and that the linguistic accuracy of their responses demonstrated a low language competence.

Our findings disproved Proposition 3, in which we measured the students' ability to identify and select relevant information and combine source materials with their original ideas. All the students were able to identify key information and their responses were relevant, if not always accurately expressed. However, they lacked a deep response to the texts, and discourse and syntax in students' writing responses to our tasks were significantly weaker in comparison to global comprehension of the texts.

Table I shows the percentage of correct answers to our linguistic competencies test.



## Context

Evidence from the progression and results of the multi-disciplinary students who attend our Open Language Programme English courses suggested that many of our students had underachieved in written assessment components. We perceived that improving students' awareness of their own technical weakness and raising their confidence in their academic writing would be an important contribution not only to their motivation but also an improvement of their grading in all their written assessments in the university. Plagiarism, we felt, was often an expression of lack of technical competency in the language.

Our research was designed to look at the cognitive and writing skills necessary for students to be able to incorporate their academic reading into their academic writing effectively. We aimed to find out, firstly, what difficulties the students had in

doing this, and then to design and test on-line teaching and learning tools which would improve their performance.

We were also interested in any variance in attitude to student writing across the subject areas. Sternglass (1997) and Zamal (1998) suggest that many teachers will make judgements about their students' intellectual ability based on the structural and grammatical coherence of their writing. In another significant study, Lea and Street (1998) discovered that university tutors had very different interpretations of what they considered appropriate in academic writing and that conventions differed widely from subject to subject. For this reason, we contacted a number of academic subject area experts from business, law, science, and art and design and asked them to evaluate our research materials. We were primarily concerned about the authenticity of the materials in an undergraduate context. We wanted to be sure that our materials reflected appropriate subject topics in each discipline and that we could later identify the cognitive and writing skills required in the discipline effectively. After the study, we asked the SAEs for more information about the particular abilities in critical thinking and academic writing that they looked for among students of their own disciplines.

## **Methodology**

In our research we borrowed from aspects of a task-based language learning approach by initially presenting students with authentic material and an authentic academic task. The design of the questions in Task 2 was also loosely based on a problem-based scenario in which students would 'learn by doing', and in which they were engaged with the problem (Barrows 1996). We were interested to collect data on the grammatical and syntactical construction of the students' writing but also on coherence and cohesion. Our combined approach to working at both sentence and paragraph level is supported by the literature; according to Myles (2002) students enter writing programmes with the expectation of improving their accuracy at the same time as getting sufficient feedback on their writing products. Faced with purely grammatical issues, however, many students are likely to focus on these alone and are less likely to appreciate their weakness in knowledge transforming tasks. We designed a reflective question in Task 2 to measure any weakness in this area.

Our second concern was the relevance of our reading to the undergraduate subject areas as we intended to create authentic writing tasks. In English for Specific Purposes or Academic Purposes classes, the students are very often presented with reading which, it is perceived by the language teacher, is appropriate for general subject interest. So, Engineering students will read about roads and dams irrespective of whether they are studying civil or mechanical engineering; Science students will read about the environment and global warming irrespective of whether they are studying genomes or pharmacy and Law students may read about

criminal cases although their interest is in human rights. Our cohorts also came from a range of specialisations within broad degree categories and thus we selected texts which were more general than specific. However, we were aware that we might be falling into the same problem area and thus we needed the expert opinions from the subject tutors to create innovative materials.

## **Discussion**

It was clear that the students' lack of key competencies in English language diminished their performance in the diagnostic test and in Task 1 and Task 2. A lower than 51% proficiency in grammar, lexical grammar, discourse and syntax would militate against academic expression of a sophisticated or complex nature. Thus, learning materials must include opportunities for practice and reinforcement in these key skills.

The transition from Task 1, in which students summarised the text, to Task 2 where they integrate their writing with an existing summary was found to be too abrupt. This was borne out by the comments of some of our SAEs who recommended a second reflective stage, in keeping with our reflective question number 1, where students compared the language which they produced with a model answer. This view was shared by the cohort, as in each response to Task 2 there was an indication that they were thinking critically about their own work and would have liked to change some aspect of it. The introduction of the reflective stage is supported by the literature (Kolb 1984) and the concept of the learning cycle.

The reading texts were considered thematically appropriate and challenging enough for undergraduates. The SAEs made the stipulation that such texts should (1) contain an argument and (2) that there should be opportunities to search for further information, if necessary. This will be a key element in future design of tasks as this process most closely resembles an undergraduate learning experience.

The selection of content for the summary texts also drew the designers into the area of deep and surface learning considerations (Marton & Saljo 1976) and the need for any learning materials to follow the process of critical thinking, constructing arguments, and applying knowledge in order that they be of value to students in higher education. In future, consideration will be given to providing further steps in the learning process of summarising and paraphrasing.

## **Conclusion**

Collaboration between English language specialists and colleagues in the subject areas in designing, evaluating and discussing jointly owned teaching and learning materials is still comparatively rare in higher education although there are many instances of advisory collaboration on materials owned by one group or the other.

In association with SAEs we intend to design materials to give students more practise in summarising and responding to texts from their own subject areas, and more examples of academic conventions. These materials will be suited to online learning and for subject teachers to integrate into their own courses as part of their blended learning strategies. The confidence engendered among students by this work may have the effect of diminishing incidents of plagiarism and raising standards in academic writing in the subject areas.

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