Supporting 3rd Year Dissertations

Marion Colledge
Convenor BA English Language Studies Degree
London Metropolitan University

Introduction

This article reviews a programme of workshops aimed at maximizing group interaction, beyond traditional initial lectures and tutorials, in supporting undergraduate students with their Honours-level Project in BA English Language Studies. The teaching and learning activities used in the group sessions could be applied to a wide range of subject areas.

Students on this course write a double-weighted Project of around 7000- 9,000 words, which occupies an important place in determining their Honours degree classification. The module provides them with the opportunity to work on investigating an extended task which they design themselves subject to their tutors' approval. Level 6 English Subject Benchmarks should be reflected in the final Project. These include the recommendation that final-year modules should touch on 'knowledge at the forefront of the field', as well as involve 'working independently', 'criticality', and 'collaboration' (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007).

Producing a long Dissertation or Project is likely to be the most challenging task that undergraduates will have faced. Yet there is little pedagogic literature in the area of undergraduate projects, as opposed to postgraduate dissertations, and none specifically in the area of BA English Language Studies. Sanderson, Clewes and Hand (1998) recommend the use of collaboration in the form of learning sets and learning contracts in preparing undergraduates for Business Studies Projects. Burgess (2007) and Cullen (2008) report on improvements to the design of undergraduate projects in the field of Tourism. Webster, Pepper & Jenkins (2000) deal with applying fair criteria in assessing undergraduate dissertations. However, these studies are of limited value to the challenge presented by the substantive project in English Language Studies. Language teaching experts, Swales and Feak (2000; also Swales 2004), in the American context, and Paltridge (2000), in Australia, describe the use of the genre approach (an approach showing how the structure and language of a document are closely tied to purpose) with ESL (English second language) students

preparing postgraduate dissertations. However, on a broader front, writers such as Mary Lea & Brian Street (1998 and 1999) emphasise the need to focus on developing writing skills *throughout* a student's academic career, as written tasks and practices change.

Context

Roughly half of our students are from ethnic minorities and 'priority postcode' areas and about 50% are from the European Union and have English as their second language. We work against a background of significant fluidity in the student body, with some of the students transferring from other courses, sometimes in European universities.

When the author and co-lecturer assumed responsibility for the English Language Studies Project Module in 2007, there were six hours of initial class sessions covering an introduction to the Project and choice of topic, an introduction to research methods, and a workshop with the Academic Liaison Librarian on literature searches. After this very short introduction students were required to submit a Project Proposal Form. Thereafter, the tuition was individual: 10 hours of tutorial support spread across two semesters, the onus being on students to make tutorial appointments. (This individual tutorial support was later reduced to 7 hours and this last year to 5 hours.)

Most students were writing review-based Projects. The problem was that in order to achieve the required length (then 9000 words), weaker students, rather than using a wider range of sources including up-to-date articles, were summarising a few book sources at greater length than they had done in their essays, making for rather weak results. Occasionally also there was a problem of non-completion. Furthermore, the findings of a small piece of action research on the Project module (conducted during 2008/09) revealed that very few students had prior experience of undertaking any research. The nearest they came to experiencing it was filling out market research surveys. Most students expressed very positive feelings about doing an individual Project, yet about half the students reported 'confusion' or 'anxiety', particularly with regard to choosing and defining their Project area, and problems with time management. (My experience as an academic adviser in another area of the University has shown that these two problems occur widely.) Additionally, based on the sample of projects we analysed, another common issue was that some students wanted to write what they discovered on a broad topic of their choice, and 'retell the story'. Taking a critical stance, even though taught from first year onwards, went by the wayside. Hence, we wanted to find ways to enable students to retain student confidence, but also to produce some related independent research on an aspect of the English Language.

Project innovations

We set up a Project where students would have to undertake some primary research. By encouraging the students to carry out a short investigation of their own, linked to their lives or interests, we were facilitating more of a "deep learning" approach. To illustrate: a Polish-born student first reviewed Polish immigration and ESOL teaching to young children, then wrote a study based on transcriptions of an interview with a teacher, and notes of two afternoons of observations of the language utterances and behaviour of a Polish-speaking child learning English in a London primary school. A Kurdish-speaking student reviewed writings on language-switching, then observed this phenomenon in a driving lesson given by a Kurdish-speaking driving instructor in North London. Nevertheless, the literature review would still be challenging to organise. For instance, for a student writing about the attitudes of British migrants in Spain towards the Spanish, this meant sorting out in which order to write about statistical data about British migration, sociological issues and linguistic issues.

In order to provide students with a clearer sense of the task, our new Project format broke the 7000-9000 word Project into key sections each with broad recommended lengths:
- Introduction – c. 600-1000 words
- short literature review c.2500-3000 words

Student's own Study:

- methodology (including ethics where applicable) c. 600 words
- methods of data analysis c. 400 words
- report on findings c. 2000-2500 words
- conclusion and evaluation. 600-800 words
- bibliography
- appendices of raw data.

We also devised a set of group sessions held at the beginning of the module, to support students in choosing, planning and undertaking their projects (see appendix).

Evaluation of the new approach

The programme of group workshops and allied support has been successful in many respects. For the students, the opportunity of seeing previous projects and speaking to a former project student, was generally useful in making the way clear. Engagement in refining each other's project titles and scope was generally an effective step in persuading students to trim topics and titles down to manageable levels, and in giving them confidence in what they were doing. Other students were realistic in spotting pitfalls in unachievable projects such as the proposal to go to

Nigeria in the Christmas vacation to interview students about their attitude to Yoruba and English. Many students were prevented from getting off to false starts. Occasionally there were quite weak students who needed to consider the structure of the Project again at a later date in tutorial. Conversely, there are also benefits for tutors in not having to repeat similar information many times over in individual tutorials.

Disadvantages are that perhaps not all students would need such detailed guidance as that which we provided, but it is our contention that very many students could benefit from these procedures. In addition, getting students to stay in the support groups in which they worked in Week 4 was less successful. They preferred to email the tutor for an answer.

Nevertheless, student evaluation of our ongoing support was very positive. This is summed up by one self-doubting student:

> *"Had it not been for my tutor's constant reminder …, I would not have made the effort to even show it [my work] to him. It's sad that some people are too embarrassed to show their work for fear that it may be too inferior compared to other people's (sic)".*

Significantly, our External Examiner has stated that some of the Projects are 'nice pieces of primary research', a good preparation for Postgraduate work.

In terms of hard results, the first year we implemented these changes, Project grades of weaker students in particular improved from D's to C's, and a higher proportion of students gained A's. However, since then, results, which also depend on many social and economic factors affecting the commitment of members of a cohort of students, have varied annually.

Of course, there is not one catch-all solution. Some students still do not write very critical literature reviews. Despite the calendar issued, approximately a third of students still work 'last minute', sometimes staying up most nights to work the week before the Project hand-in date. As they draw nearer to Postgraduate work, there has to be a balance between advice and freedom. We think we achieved a Project Process which largely kept the balance between the independent work and collaboration required by the subject benchmarks.

Acknowledgements

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Biographical note

Marion Colledge has taught aspects of Applied Linguistics, Education, English as a foreign Language and English for Specific Purposes in a variety of educational settings in the UK, and has also worked in the Ivory Coast, Eastern Europe and China. Current interests include academic writing, student-tutor feedback and interaction, dyslexia and dyspraxia. She is now Course Leader for BA English Language Studies. **Email**: m.colledge@londonmet.ac.uk

Programme of Workshops to Support Honours-level Projects

Week 1 Workshop

Aim 1: To show the students that their Undergraduate Project should be set within an academic context and they should know what studies have gone before it. Discuss why recent and key articles should be included in the reading for a Project. Consider how if uniquely books are used, they may provide rather repetitive material.

Activity: Discussion/Reading of completed Projects/ Meeting a student who is one semester (half way) through their Project, or if available, one who has completed it, in order to draw on their experience.

Aim 2: to learn about the feasibility and suitability of various Research Method links to studies in 2nd Year Language and Society module, or even on student experience of market research; students to realise the small amount which they can do in 10 hours a week over two semesters.

Activity: Discussion with paper information. Capitalise on student knowledge. Consider the size and breadth and methodology, size of teams, length of writing before publication of a couple of research studies.

Week 2 Workshop

Aims: To investigate the structure of previous projects; 2. For students to pinpoint what they can do.

Activity 1: Students will have looked at some Grade A and Grade B Projects temporarily placed on web learn. (It is necessary to read them beforehand as some students cannot skim through two 7000 words projects in a room with distractions). Discussion around previous Projects with question sheet.

Activity 2: Students, using a framework sheet, make an initial list of three possible topics of interest and methods of investigation (see Figure 1 below). Other students consider their feasibility.

Table 1 Framework for Narrowing down Project

Precise topic
Precise setting
Precise dates
Precise Group of participants/ texts to be studied
Supported by whish school of thought
Methods to be used

Week 3 Workshop - Writing the literature review

Aim: To address relevance of reading materials and criticality. Work with a template, following on from one issued in the First Year, to focus on the discipline, period, and quality of evidence of the writers of extracts.

Activity: Structuring a Project literature review: diverse topics require decisions about ordering of information: in a funnel shape, in blocks etc. Students work with practice sets of article abstracts to discuss their potential arrangement into clusters (Swales and Feak, 2000; Hart, 1995).
Students complete 'fun' exercises with excerpts of dissertations – must use linguistic and topic evidence to deduce to what sections of a Project these belong.

Week 4 Workshop

Aim 1: To build up a reading list and practise using academic search engines via the library website
Activity – workshop with the librarian and the tutor in a computer room. One of the roles of the tutor in this session was to note any students who appeared to be making little progress.

Aim 2: To support each other by sharing items
Activity: Sharing Reading lists: Lists of most useful articles and books for each of the three above broad topic areas are on web learn, available for the students so that they do not have to begin a search from absolute scratch. Students proposing to do work on similar areas were then placed in groups to compare their proposals and early reading lists

Aim 3: To address time management
Activity: Students were issued with pro forma including calendar of suggested 'milestones' against which they could map their progress; students were asked to give provisional dates for completion of each item of their proposed reading and rough dates for their practical research.

Submission of Project Proposal *pro forma* three days later.

Week 5 Workshop

Aim: Encourage students to begin reading one book and one article for their topic area promptly. Encourage peer scrutiny.
Activity: Five minute peer presentation of proposal and initial reading completed during the last two weeks; fielding critical questions from other students. (This counts towards Project Process marks).

Week 6/7 Tutor feedback

Activity: Tutor feedback on proposal *pro forma* and presentation, generally given by email; student called for immediate tutorial if proposal appears weak.

Weeks 8-15 – Two 30 minute tutorials (if desired)

Activity: Tutors were proactive in inviting students whom we considered to be weak to tutorials if they did not appear for four weeks. After tutorials a *pro forma* tutorial record was made that was a joint construction between teacher and student.
We began to handle tutorial advice by email when circumstances such as family illness prevented face to face attendance.

Week 11 - Group Sessions

Aim: Students to progress their methodology for their practical investigation working in groups with common interests.

Week 14 Submission of Introduction, literature review and methodology for proposed individual investigation

Week 1 – Semester 2

Aims: To tidy up research permissions; be clear about quantity of data to analyse, methods of analysis

Activity: Separate short practical group sessions on analysis of various types of data.

Rest of Semester 2:

Individual tutorials – up to three 30 minute tutorials