

The Impact of English as a Second Language (ESL) on Assessment Practice in Journalism Education

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Introduction

Students who have English as a Second Language (ESL) in higher education (HE) institutions experience various difficulties and have specific issues and concerns that impinge on assessment practice. This paper identifies what these are as well as their significance within London Metropolitan University, within the context of multi-cultural and international HE within the UK and across a broad set of disciplines. It will also examine the implications of ESL and assessment within my own discipline, Journalism, where language is both the principal currency for success and the final product.

Key areas examined to explore and inform future thinking and practice are:

1. Identification of issues relating to ESL Journalism students within assessment practice, including bad grammar, spelling and writing and poor verbal skills, as well as an often different understanding of plagiarism;
2. Examination of current types of assessment within the Journalism discipline at London Met, and how successful they are for ESL students;
3. Investigation of both the official stance in Journalism undergraduate programme concerning assessments written in poor English, and unofficial practice, to determine the tolerance of lecturers toward assessments written in faulty English, and what factors – if any – influence their marking;
4. Recommendations for other types of assessment in Journalism for ESL students.

Being a good journalist requires a variety of attributes and there is an on-going debate over which ones are most important. Journalists need to be inquisitive, thoughtful and unbiased, with excellent reporting and technological skills and strong ethics. Health journalists need a background in a health-related or medical discipline; property journalists require a fundamental grasp of current property laws. But all journalists – whether in print, online, television or radio - need strong writing skills, which obviously go hand-in-hand with an excellent command of the language in

which they work. “Good clear English is the stock-in-trade for newspapers and broadcasting” (Evans, 2000) and “clear, accurate, correctly punctuated English” is a crucial aspect of journalism (Harris and Spark, 1998, p.87).

Yet at London Met, where roughly 25 per cent of students at present (time of writing) come from abroad, this is far from the case. The University’s current student body comprises over 26,000 individuals, an estimated 7,300 of whom are international, representing about 200 different nationalities and many different languages (The Independent, 2011). Additionally, about 44 per cent of the University’s UK students are ethnic minorities, a significant percentage of whom do not have English as a native language either, although no actual statistics are available.

In past years, international students applying for any London Met undergraduate degree needed an overall IELTS score of 5.5, with a minimum of at least 5.0 in each of the components (Licorish, 2011). Compare this to minimum English-language requirements at Oxford University, which mandates that international students must have an overall IELTS score of 7.0, with at least 7.0 in each of the four components (University of Oxford Admissions, 2011). What this means is that many overseas students who come to London Met face a considerable challenge to successfully meet the rigorous demands of university study, due the level of their English language competence.

In some disciplines English skills may be less important than others, such as mathematics or computing. “We just came from our revision and our teacher says, ‘Don’t worry about your writing. It’s more about the logic,’” a computer programming student from Mauritius told me. “Your grammar or your writing should [is not expected to be] like BBC English. You can write anything as long as it makes sense to the teacher or person marking it.”

This could be said about Journalism, where students learn to gather information, analyse material, organise data, cultivate sources, collate their findings, report and write, and perfect technical skills. But it remains a fact that English is the medium in which all their university assignments will be conducted – as the **product** and not just as a vehicle to get their point across. Perhaps more importantly, most will go on to work in English in their professional environment, whether they write articles, prepare radio interviews or produce TV broadcasts.

Identification of Particular Issues

In my recent personal experience teaching first-, second- and third-year Journalism students at London Met, the level of English amongst ESL students covers a broad ability range. But the majority of ESL students, especially first-year entrants, lack basic written English-language skills, although some are competent in spoken English.

Plagiarism can also be problematic within the assessment process where the educational approach “does not take into account the cultural values and writing practices of international or second-language students”. For example, non-native speakers often employ “patch writing”, in which copied text is only slightly modified – which is not seen as a “deceptive form” of plagiarism. Repetition (copying) of someone else’s work is also not seen not as plagiarism in some cultures, but a mark of respect (*University Assessment Framework*, London Metropolitan University, 2010, pp. 42-43).

Overall, it is generally accepted that poor English is a “key diagnosis for failure to make PhD grade” (Jump, 2011) in many UK institutions, and this is also the case for undergraduates, particularly in disciplines such as Journalism, Creative Writing and Media Studies, where written English is the product. The problem is so “rife” (Evans, 2000) that some editors have suggested that university journalist training programmes include compulsory remedial English courses (ibid.) – even for native speakers of English. “The failure to write coherently in sentences is one of the most common faults in modern journalism,” writes freelance journalist Wynford Hicks (Hicks, 2010). As a first-year Journalism and Fashion Marketing student from Italy, told me: “Being a journalism student is harder. In Marketing I have all As and Bs, in Journalism I have Cs and Ds.”

Current Assessment Types

At present, the undergraduate Journalism programme at London Met uses different sources and a variety of methods and instruments to assess students (both formative and summative). Some formative assessments are used to improve students’ writing and reporting skills, as well as build their confidence as budding journalists. Summative assessments are either theoretical or practical; often the practical ones mimic the tasks journalists will be given in their future workplace. Among these are timed writing exercises, preparation of radio and video broadcasts, and writing blogs, newspaper and magazine articles.

Below is a list of the main types of assessments in Journalism as well as the types of skills and abilities they measure, and the particular advantages/disadvantages each one throws up when it comes to ESL students.

- **Timed writing exercise:** Assesses students’ ability to present information succinctly within a specific time frame, to reflect actual journalistic practice. Difficult for those who struggle with written English.
- **Newspaper/magazine article:** Used to assess students’ ability to write articles in a journalistic manner. Can accurately reflect whether they understand the structure of writing an article, regardless of English level. Students can get help to correct their written English beforehand.

- **Portfolio:** Assesses students' understanding of the coursework through different written and/or verbal tasks, as the portfolio can consist of both written and verbal work (radio and TV). Verbal work reflects actual journalistic practice.
- **Essay:** Used to assess students' subject knowledge. Easier for those with poor English as they can get language help to improve final paper.
- **Verbal presentation (individual or group):** Assesses subject knowledge as well as reflecting actual journalistic practice, particularly in broadcast disciplines.
- **Blog:** Assesses students' understanding of online journalism as well as the quality of their writing. The quantity of written work often makes this an accurate reflection of how well they can actually write in English.
- **Radio and video broadcasts:** Provides accurate reflection of students' subject knowledge, as well as actual journalistic practice, if done as a timed exercise.

Many ESL students find timed assessments the most difficult to do well. Overall, they perform better when they have extra time to prepare. Radio and TV-led assessments can also be difficult if students' verbal English skills are under par. Students who get the highest marks are those who do numerous rewrites, with tutor help. Sadly, while this may result in a positive outcome/grade for a specific assessment, it does not reflect the reality of journalism, where few editors will allow their employees to do any rewrites - or give feedback.

Lecturer Stance in Assessment Practice

The London Met Journalism staff have one golden rule when it comes to assessment: no student can get a first if there are many obvious mistakes in spelling or grammar. Whether to give a student a B or a C is another matter. Should we be more lenient when assessing non-native speakers of English, especially when written English is often the end product? As the first-year grades are not factored into their overall course average for degree categorisation purposes, should we be more lenient then – and hope they'll improve?

An Australian study suggests that a conflict could exist between “lecturers' perceptions of how they should assess students' work – that is, using a common standard regardless of language background – and what they are really doing in practice” (Baik, 2008). The survey found that just 68 per cent of lecturers “provided the same standards” to students when it came to assessment, regardless of whether they were native English speakers or not. Twenty per cent were more lenient when it came to grammar, spelling and freedom of expression.

Leniency arguably exists in the Journalism programme at London Met, where the programme ethos is inclusive and encouraging. Lecturers have made it clear that if an ESL student with passable (but not strong) English shows up regularly for class, participates and is obviously trying hard but presents a final assessment full of small errors, the lecturer will probably grade up, rather than down. “When reading work in poor English, it's often easy to ‘squint’ and imagine what the student really means

to say, to see behind their bad writing,” one lecturer told me. That said, most lecturers grade essays, for example, partly on quality of structure, partly on original thinking, and partly on grammar and spelling.

To sum up:

- ESL students who might well have got a first, but lack proficiency in English, are marked down at least one grade. As first-year grades are not averaged into the final degree result – and English often improves with study – some are not overly penalised for poor English.
- There is a certain amount of leniency towards ESL students who are perceived as trying hard but still have trouble with English.
- Lecturers in practice are often forced to use their imaginations when it comes to grading work of ESL students. This could produce artificially higher marks, and could therefore work in the students’ favour.
- The University offers English-language help to those who need it, including pre-sessional English for a maximum of two months for those who are just shy of the admission requirements (Licorish, 2011). Help with English and essay writing used to be available throughout the year to all students. Due to budget cuts this is being phased out. Additionally, many of my students who needed help did not take advantage of it, even when it was freely on offer.

Recommendations

Assessments in Journalism courses should help students progress and build up confidence. However to have assessments that do not reflect true professional practice is to do them a disservice, and could harm their employability prospects in future. Employability is not only about skills, but also “an activity which prepares individuals for long-term employment” (Keane, 2009, p.101). Ideally, assessments should build toward summative assessments in third-year modules that are true tests of students’ abilities and accurately reflect the work they will be doing in the real world as journalists.

For example, first-year students could take weekly timed formative assessments which are ungraded, to help them prepare for the final summative assessments. This would help them feel comfortable with the format and build confidence, especially if timely tutor feedback is given. Ensuring that feedback is related to the different components of the exercise (i.e. structure, grammar, original thinking) will allow ESL students to see what they are doing right, even if their English is poor. Without feedback, the “learner is unlikely to improve” (Rogers, 1989, p.58).

Additionally, broadcast journalism students who might be required to prepare a short news broadcast as part of their summative assessment, could participate in group presentations early in the semester. They could learn from native English speakers and prepare better when it comes to the final assessment. Lecturers in the

Journalism programme already give Grammar 101 hand-outs to first-year students, and actively encourage those with poor English to get help. Whether this makes any difference remains to be seen.

Conclusion

How to assess ESL Journalism students fairly but in a way that is helpful to their future employability is an on-going challenge and warrants further research and discussion. New changes to the Tier 4 visa rules have recently come into effect and correspondingly an overall IELTS score of 5.5 – as well as a 5.5, instead of a 5, in each component - is now a necessary minimum to get into London Met. This could reduce the proportion of international students with language difficulties who drop out, and improve the quality of work overall of those who stay (Licorish, 2011).

But in disciplines such as Journalism, where English skills are paramount, the problem is likely to remain. Only slightly higher IELTS scores may make a small difference, but will not be a solution. A “much more diverse student body” that “challenges existing assumptions about what can be expected from new students” means that more support for students is needed; otherwise, “poor early experience of assessment” could lead to a higher attrition rate (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007, p. 4).

Journalism remains an unusual discipline in that it is unusually creative and word-dependent, demanding a high level of language competence. It is also directly preparing students for the workplace. Assessments should encourage ESL students and help build on their progress, yet at the same time prepare them for the harsh realities of life in a very competitive profession. A crucial part of this should be the provision of formative feedback given throughout the semester (Gosling, 2009).

Devising new methods of assessment that are realistic yet help build student confidence and encourage ESL students to work on skills and language acquisition, especially in the first year, is a challenging and potentially rewarding task for tutors and lecturers alike. The first cohort of Journalism students at London Met has now graduated, entering a very difficult professional climate. How they will fare in the real world will influence the teaching of future cohorts.

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Biographical Note

Wendy Sloane was a reporter-researcher for Time Magazine in New York and Vienna before spending seven years in the former Soviet Union. She covered the Soviet collapse for The Associated Press and was foreign correspondent for The Daily Telegraph and Christian Science Monitor, where she wrote about the war in Chechnya, civil strife in Georgia and general post-coup upheaval. Upon moving to the UK, she worked on the foreign desk of The Telegraph and had a documentary commissioned about polygamy for Channel 4. She was Deputy Features Editor of *Marie Claire* magazine, Deputy Editor of *Eva* and Deputy Editor of *Woman's Own* before moving into freelance full-time, writing for both national newspapers and magazines. With a bachelor's degree in Russian and Political Science from Mt. Holyoke College and a master's degree in International Relations from Columbia University, she moved to London Met in 2010, bringing with her extensive experience of working in virtually every print medium.