

**Pedagogical Research Fund
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Final Report

Project title: An Active Awareness Approach to In-Sessional English Teaching

Introduction

The aim of this project was to develop teaching materials based on existing theories of language learning and linguistics. The context was an In-Sessional English programme in the Language Centre at the University of Leeds. In-Sessional courses are known to be problematic for a range of reasons including large student numbers, multiple proficiency levels, and varied subject disciplines.

The project developed a new approach – active awareness – in which students are taught to identify and analyse useful structures at the sentence and text level before reproducing and extending them in their own writing. The emphasis was on developing the skill of analysing language in texts so that this active awareness strategy would become a part of the student's study skill repertoire to draw on in present and future academic studies. In this report I will first present the materials developed, highlighting the theoretical premise throughout. I will then discuss the findings of the pre- and post-testing. I will begin, however, with a brief description of the context of the course.

Like most universities in UK, the University of Leeds offers free academic English support classes to non-native English speakers enrolled on degree courses. While language provision for all students is not possible, the Language Centre offers classes to those in most need of language support. This is determined by a language test that is mandatory for all international students new to Leeds. The funding for this project allowed the development of an additional class to the existing range of In-Sessional classes on offer. This new course, Reading for Writing, was aimed at students of a higher level of writing ability while students of a lower writing ability were guided into the existing Academic Writing course.

There were two Reading for Writing classes offered in the first semester of the 2006-2007 academic year, one taught by Ms Judith Hanks of the Leeds Language Centre and the other by Dr Melinda Whong, the lead investigator¹. A group of 30 students enrolled and attended each of the first Reading for Writing classes. Of this 60, a core of about 20 in both classes stayed throughout the course, attending the majority of the weekly classes. No single student attended all the classes, however, and in the last few weeks the average class size was 7. While this does not seem like a very high retention rate, in the context of In-Sessional classes, it is relatively high. As is typical of In-Sessional classes, those students who remained committed to the course tended to have higher levels of proficiency coupled with very high levels of motivation. This is particularly relevant when considering the results of the post-test and the questionnaire. The course ran for seven weeks, meeting for two hours once a week.

Course Design

The general theoretical premise of Active Awareness is Noticing/Focus on Form (Schmidt 1990, 1993; Long 1991). The emphasis is on training the student to be able to discover relevant constructions and phrases as opposed to the more explicit teaching of lexical phrases that is characteristic of the Lexical Approach (Lewis 1993, Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992). The very high academic and language level of these university students lends itself to this approach. In addition to the general notion of Noticing, the Active Awareness curriculum is based on a theory of second language acquisition, the Modular Online Growth and Use of Language (MOGUL) of Sharwood Smith (2004) and Truscott & Sharwood Smith (2004), the linguistic approach of Construction Grammar (e.g. Fillmore 1988; Goldberg 1995, 2006), and the pedagogical approach of Genre Analysis (e.g. Swale 1990). I will elaborate on each in turn as I present the core features of the Reading for Writing course.

Following a Genre Approach, the course was centred around one academic journal article chosen because it addresses a problem of general concern thought to be accessible by students from a range of academic backgrounds. The article was: Preston, Samuel H. (1986) Changing Values and Falling Birth Rates. *Population and Development Review*. 12: 176-195. The starting point of the course was the basic tenets of Genre Analysis in which the rhetorical features of a particular genre are explicitly

taught. As the genre in question is academic writing, in the first class students were asked to skim the paper looking for features of academic writing. To highlight these features, they were also asked to compare the Preston paper to an article from *The Observer*. (See Week One in Appendix A.) Throughout the course, elements of genre-based teaching were included. This was done at the level of text by highlighting the structure of introductions, conclusions, etc. as well as at the sentence level.

The more original contribution of this approach was the emphasis at the sentence level. Drawing on Construction Grammar (e.g. Fillmore 1988; Goldberg 1995, 2006), language in this approach is seen as patterns of words identifiable by a particular syntactic structure, but whose component parts give rise to a larger meaning that associates it with a particular genre (Whong 2006). The main thrust of the course, therefore, was to learn how to identify useful phrases within academic writing so that they might become a part of the student's productive repertoire. At the beginning of the course students were asked to identify useful constructions in the text (See Weeks One and Two in Appendix A.). The following phrases, taken from the Preston paper, are examples of the type of construction students were asked to identify:

- To fully answer this question will require . . .
- It may be that other factors are also involved.
- The role of ... appears to be central to . . .
- One could argue that . . .
- There is a temptation to assume that . . .
- Consideration of...is necessary for a complete understanding of...
- But is it reasonable to . . .
- It seems, then, that . . .
- In short, we are not able to account for ...

In addition to the time spent in class identifying useful phrases, students were given homework each week which asked them to identify useful phrases in the reading that they were doing in their studies on their degree course. As full time students, there is a limit to how much time they are able to spend on improving their language skills outside the demands of their course. The main aim of the homework was to encourage students to apply the active awareness approach in their everyday academic studies.

Once trained in identifying useful phrases, the students did tasks to analyse the phrases. Analysis exercises included grouping phrases in terms of their function and analysis of phrases to make explicit how they are used for developing an argument, for citing existing literature and for more general points of coherence and cohesion. (See Weeks Three and Four in Appendix A.)

The theoretical premise for including analysis of phrases on this course is the Modular Online Growth and Use of Language (MOGUL) (Sharwood Smith. 2004; Truscott & Sharwood Smith 2004). The main tenet of MOGUL is that language develops through active and repeated use. Drawing from work in psycholinguistics the claim is that learning occurs through the reinforcement of input. The MOGUL model is based on Jackendoff's (2002, 2007) proposals for the mental architecture of language whereby core linguistic knowledge is distinct and constrained by Universal Grammar while other aspects of language are a part of more general knowledge. This dual representation of knowledge posits the quality of knowledge to be different, but assumes that the development of such knowledge occurs through the same mechanism. It is this latter insight that allows for a view of second language development in which patterns of language can be taught and learned explicitly for effective language production. Moreover, according to MOGUL, language production based on these patterns can become automatized such that output can be of a very high proficiency.

With this idea in mind, exercises requiring the analysis of language patterns were developed to give students the chance to manipulate language patterns. The assumption is that this allows for reinforcement and strengthening in linguistic memory. In time then, these patterns should become available for productive use. The last stages of the course, therefore, involved production tasks involving the inclusion of useful academic phrases in writing. The production tasks began at the sentence level, but then included writing at the text level. (See Weeks Five and Six in Appendix A.) The hope was that by the end of the course, students would be able to extend the use of phrases not only into writing tasks given in the Reading for Writing class, but also into their writing on their degree course.

Evaluation of the Course

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the course, two informal measures were applied. Students were given a brief pre- and post-test, and they were asked to complete a questionnaire about the course. The pre-test was incorporated as a task done in class during the first week while the post-test and questionnaire were conducted in the final class on the course.²

The pre- and post-test were comprised of writing samples based on a short text that was read in class. The structure and format of both tests were the same, though the content of the writing differed. Each test contained two parts. The first part required the student to write a short paragraph in academic style. The second asked them to edit and rewrite the paragraph to include specific phrases and/or constructions choosing from a list provided. The expectation was that students would be better in two respects. Firstly their academic writing skills would improve in a general sense. Secondly, they would be able to incorporate 'useful' academic phrases with more ease and more effectively after taking the course.

Given the poor overall retention rates on the course, a formal discussion with statistical analysis of results is not possible. Of the 60 students who began the course in each of the two classes, only 13 in total were in attendance in the last week of class to do the post-test and questionnaire. Nevertheless, some points can be made which indicate the effect of this course on students' academic writing skills.

In the pre-test, students' ability to incorporate academic phrases was somewhat limited. Twelve (of 60) students did not incorporate any phrases, while 27 students only added one phrase. This contrasts with the post-test in which all 13 students were able to incorporate phrases in their writing. While this is a very large increase in terms of percentage, it must be noted again that it tends to be the most motivated and capable students who continue to attend these classes to the end.

In addition to number, there was a qualitative difference in the type of phrase incorporated into the writing. In both tests students were given lists of academic phrases from the Preston article and asked to try to incorporate any that seemed appropriate into the paragraph they had just written. In the pre-test the phrases that were incorporated tended to be very generic. Examples include: *in short*, and *one could argue that...* The phrases used in the post-test task were more sophisticated, including: *to fully answer this question requires...*, and *there is no obvious reason why...*

In addition, the post-test showed an increased ability to modify the phrases to fit the student's original writing. Even though the instructions in both the pre-test and the post-test included the suggestion of modifying the phrases as needed, very few of the students in the pre-test did so, and none to a noteworthy degree. In contrast, a number of students in the post-test modified the phrases to fit their writing. Examples of modified phrases include: *the principle possibilities can be grouped in five reasons*, *consideration of the population growth rate is necessary for understanding...* As seen in these examples, the net result of the modification at times resulted in non-native-like expressions. Arguably, however, this is a healthy result showing a stage of development in which the phrase is becoming a part of the student's academic English Interlanguage.

Results of the questionnaire show the overall response to the course by these students to be very positive. Once again, however, these results must be considered in light of the fact that only 13 students attended the last class; and one must keep in mind that these 13 students were highly motivated and already had very high levels of English proficiency. In general, the students seem to recognise the approach taken in the course to be different from most of the academic English courses they had taken to date. They also seemed to take on board the aims of the approach. The following responses mention this explicitly:

- We were taught that we can actually improve our build up academic writing by analysing texts we normally read. In other words, extract from them the useful language for our own writing.
- I was taught the skills to use particular phrases in my academic writing so as to make it formal
- I like that way of teaching approach. I can bring back and use it after the class
- If you memorize useful phrases of language, you can write easily and more quickly.

There were also comments that were critical of the course, but none of them disapproved of the approach taken. Some examples include:

- The content fitted my needs, but I think we should practise more writings.
- Well, I would say it was sometimes boring. However, I cannot think of any other approach to be taken in a class that aims at writing. Maybe the sessions could be a bit shorter.
- It helped me to organise my ideas properly. However, I think we should had practised more
- I don't think that my academic writing has improved too much. It is difficult to understand the English style, that differs from, in my case, Italian style.

Whether the course has had any long term impact on the students is difficult to know. It is also unclear whether students actually applied what they were learning to their studies. In response to the question whether they thought about academic phrase approach when they were studying on their degree course during the seven weeks, all but one admitted that they had not. This is not surprising given the very limited nature of the In-Sessional course in terms of time. Further research based on a more comprehensive academic English course might lead to a stronger effect on students' academic English ability.

Endnotes

¹ The course was also offered in 2008 and will hopefully continue to run.

² Students were all told in the first class that the course was part of a funded project and that they would be asked if their work could be used for research. In addition it was made clear that they could withdraw from the class and/or the research at any time. In the final class students were again reminded that the course was part of a research project. In addition, they were asked to sign consent forms to allow their writing and their questionnaire responses to be used in academic publications. All of the students were not only willing, but eager for their work to contribute to the research project.

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Appendix A: Outline of Reading for Writing Course

Aim of this course:

To improve your academic writing by drawing explicit attention to features of academic writing that you encounter when you read academic texts

By the end of the course, you should have developed skills to:

- analyse academic texts for academic features of writing
- identify useful phrases in text
- determine why/how the phrases you identified are useful
- use new useful phrases in your own academic writing
- recognise standard academic structure
- write following the expectations of standard academic structure
- analyse texts in your subject matter to find features of writing appropriate to your field

Week One: What Makes Writing Academic Writing?

Aims of this lesson:

- To identify features of academic writing as different from other writing
- More specifically, to identify features of academic writing as different from journalistic writing

Reading Task

1. You and your partner are going to have four minutes to read the journal article and the academic article. Decide who is going to read each one. Start from the beginning. Do not try to finish it. Just read for four minutes. After four minutes, answer the following questions for your article:

What is the topic of the article?

Who is the intended audience?

What kinds of sources are quoted directly?

2. Compare your answers.

3. Now look at both articles together. And answer the following questions:

How would you describe the tone of the article?

What is it about the article that gives it that tone?

(Some) Features of Academic Text

Register:

Formal language

Neutral/objective expression of ideas

A distance between writer and the text

Hedging = stating ideas as possibilities instead of absolute truths

Vocabulary: academic, technical, specialist

Grammatical Complexity:

Complex sentences

Passive structure

Linking words/phrases that show the connections between ideas

Tasks

1 Rewrite the first four paragraphs of the journal article in academic style.

2 Below are some phrases that could be considered useful in academic writing. Look back over the paragraph you just wrote. Using a different coloured pen, see if you can add in some phrases (or parts of phrases) to make the paragraph more academic. Or you might want to rewrite a sentence, using phrases from the list.

Some Useful Academic Phrases

So what are the causes of ... ?

Skeptics will argue that...

There is no obvious reason why [. . .]; in fact, ...

To fully answer this question will require . . .

It may be that other factors are also involved.

The role of ... appears to be central to. . .

Author's Voice: The author's voice comes out:

- when s/he says what s/he is going to do in the paper (i.e. signposting)
- through evaluation of existing work and ideas
- when elements of his/her argument are being put forward

Signposting

1. Look back at the student essay (*What makes a good essay?*) and find the Signposting in the introduction.
2. What Signposting is there in Preston's paper? What Signposting is missing?

Evaluation: One way to put forward your evaluation of existing ideas is to add in adverbial phrases.

1. For example, in the published paper on Line 23 Preston writes: 'Couples are evidently responding to...' What meaning does the adverbial, *evidently*, add to the sentence?
2. Can you find any more examples of short phrases or even single words that add a critical edge to Preston's introduction?

Argumentation: Last week we noted that Preston's Introduction does not explicitly follow the conventions of an Introduction, but is effective nonetheless. The reason is that the Introduction is structured around setting up his argument through the following moves:

- Giving the Scope of the paper (what he hopes to achieve)
- Setting out the General Explanation for the problem
- Narrowing to a more Specific Question
- Pointing out a Gap in the discussion/Saying how he is going to fill the gap

Citation: Part of developing an argument is referring to the work that already exists in the field.

1. What is the difference between the citations taken from lines 28 and 30, respectively?
Richard Easterlin (1980) vs. Norman Ryder (e.g., 1977)
2. In Lines 27-31 the author skilfully uses citation to both point out what has and what has not been done in the existing literature. Identify the exact phrases that make it clear what exists and what doesn't.

Citation: Mechanical points

- Preston cites first and last names – find out what your discipline does
- Preston uses Harvard style and not Humane style (numbered footnotes) – find out what your discipline does

Useful Academic Phrases

There are phrases that are typical of academic writing in *any* field. We are going to push this idea further by suggesting that you could learn to read texts in your own field in a way that will improve your own writing even at the sentence level. In addition to reading your assigned reading for the ideas in your field, we want you to learn to identify useful phrases in the reading that you can then use in your own writing.

For example, all of the below phrases that we have discussed have nothing to do with birth rates or population, and could be used in any field.

Useful Phrases

- My approach is to set forth...
- I believe that, by emphasizing X, the Y fills a gap left by . . .
- In short, ... are not able to account for ...
- ... are evidently responding to ...
- What are these phenomena? The principal possibilities can be grouped into three...
- A strong case for the ... has been made by ... in a series of well-known works that have been elaborated by many others.
- The importance of ... has been stressed above all by...
- X are seldom mentioned in discussions of ..., although ... has been attempting to... consideration of...is necessary for a complete understanding of...
- I will focus discussion in this area and nest the consideration of ...within such a discussion

Task: Identifying useful phrases

Consider the second paragraph (lines 9 – 21). Underline the 'useful phrases' that provide the structures academic writing (ignoring the ideas in the text).

Homework

Choose something that you are reading in your field. Pick out 3-5 useful phrases that you could use in your own writing. Write them down and be ready to share them with the class next week.

Week Four: The Function of Particular Academic Phrases

Aims of this lesson:

- to identify specific phrases that can be useful in your own academic writing
- to be able to distinguish between expressing one's own ideas and presenting others' ideas
- to recognise appropriate use of hedging in academic writing

Many of the useful phrases you find in text serve the function of signalling something structural in the text. Structural functions include:

- i) Introducing ideas, points
- ii) Giving the aims of paper/how the paper will proceed
- iii) Argument/point of view
- iv) Reference to existing work/ideas/literature/situation
- v) Transition between parts of the paper
- vi) Coherence (=smooth, connected writing)
- vii) Conclusion/Summary

1. Look at the phrases we collected last week. Decide what function they serve.

Developing an Argument and the Language of Argumentation

We have already seen the way in which Preston explains what he is going to argue at the very beginning of his paper (*Changing Values and Falling Birth Rates*). In that discussion, we noted how the development of an argument rests crucially on use of existing literature. It requires sophistication in writing to be able to make it clear when you are presenting the ideas of others and when you are making your own point.

2. Take a few minutes to scan the first half of section 'Other ideological explanations of fertility changes'. Divide the text into passages that clearly show that an idea belongs to someone else that are clearly Preston's ideas/arguments that are a mixture of existing idea and Preston's argument

3. The use of citation makes it clear that Preston is referring to existing ideas. Does Preston tend to use citation in the sentence structure? Or does he cite indirectly through brackets connected with specific ideas?

4. Now look more carefully at the passages. What exact phrases signal when the ideas are Preston's and when they are summary statements and when they are existing ideas?

Homework

As you read this week, look for examples of hedging that you can bring to class next week.

Week Five: Using useful phrases in your own writing

Aims of this lesson:

- to recognise appropriate use of hedging in academic writing
- to be able to use useful academic phrases in your own academic writing

Hedging in academic writing

1. Discuss the difference between the below sentences:
'It is clear that other factors are also involved.'

‘It seems that other factors are also involved.’
‘It is possible that other factors are also involved.’
‘It may be that other factors are also involved.’
‘It may be that other factors could also be involved.’
‘It is clear that other factors are also likely to be involved.’

2. Looking at the Preston paper again. Consider Line 21-22 ‘The role of ... appears to be central to...’ What function does this use of hedging serve?
3. In the next sentence, however Preston uses very strong language. He writes: ‘Americans clearly adopted a different stance toward...’ Why?
4. Can you find any more examples of hedging in the passage we read? And can you explain why hedging has been used?
5. Summary Question: When does Preston hedge and when does he use definitive language?
6. In fact, Preston’s overall tone is not very hedged. It tends to be quite strong. In general, published academic writing is going to be written in more definitive terms than student academic writing. Why?
7. Look at the next paragraph (Lines 43 – 51), cross out some of the strong language and replace it with hedging. BUT – don’t overdo it. Don’t make it sound like you don’t know what you’re talking about.

Consider the list of phrases taken from the Preston paper. Can you construct meaningful writing using (some of) these phrases. Work in pairs. If you need to make changes to the phrases (for reasons of grammar, for example) that’s fine. If you want to not use a particular phrase, or change it entirely, that’s fine as well. But try to use them as they are as much as possible.

Topic: The increase in international students in UK universities will lead to better relations between countries politically.

Week Six: Language of Cohesion, Transition and Conclusion

Aims of this lesson:

- to recognise the different techniques used to make a text coherent
- to identify useful phrases for transitions and conclusions

Cohesion and the Language of Transitions

1. Put the paragraphs of the essay in order.
2. How were you able to put the paragraphs in order? How did you know what came before/after what? Look back at the paragraphs and identify what clues led you to be able to do the task.
3. Identify/List specific examples of repetition of words/phrases that make the essay coherent as a text.
4. Identify/List specific examples of Transitional phrases that show the essay is moving from one thing to the next (could be whole sentences, or just parts of sentences).
5. Divide the transitional phrases into two categories:
 - Going forward: Moving on to another point
 - Looking back: Summarising a point

Conclusions

6. Where does the conclusion start in the Student Essay?
7. Go through the conclusion and identify the different functions of each part of the Conclusion (Try to do this on your own without looking at the commentary).
8. What should all good conclusions include?
9. What other things could a conclusion include?
10. What should a conclusion NOT include?
11. Look more closely at the exact language of the conclusion. How do you know it is a conclusion?

Homework:

When reading this week, look at the conclusion of something you are reading.
Is the argument included in the conclusion? What else has the author included?
Are there any useful phrases for conclusions that you might use in your own writing?

Week Seven: Summary and Conclusion

Writing Task and Questionnaire