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When 'the other' becomes the Mainstream: Models for the Education of EAL Students and their Assessment Implications

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Abstract

This paper examines three models for the academic development of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students: The Academic Support model, the Academic Development model and the Higher Education Development model. It describes how these models were realised in the South African context when black students previously designated 'the other' became the mainstream. A pedagogical approach for Higher Education in Australia involving a merger of the latter two models is suggested with a particular focus being placed on the important role that assessment plays in developing and directing student learning. Practical examples of how these models facilitate the achievement of such goals are then given.

Introduction

The Australian media has presented a polarised view of Australian universities in recent years, delineating international students from an English as an Additional Language (EAL) background as 'the other' as opposed to students of an Anglo-Australian background who are seen as 'mainstream'. It is implied that standards are lowered for this 'other' due to the fact that they pay fees, but 'lack' English proficiency and hence by implication are academically weaker than the mainstream (Alexander, 2006; 2007; Jopson, 2005; Ewart, 2007; Kayrooz, 2001). To remedy this supposed 'deficiency' universities have made provisions including increasing English language requirements and providing special language and academic support to facilitate student compliance with institutional expectations.

This situation mirrors that of South Africa in the 1980s where liberal English-medium universities attempted to provide their minority of black students with academic support programmes to give them equal opportunities and access to the academy. However, this deficit discourse became redundant in South Africa as black students increasingly entered previously white institutions and academics realised that "'underpreparedness' would eventually be a majority phenomenon" (Boughey, 2007). Similarly, in some disciplines at Australian universities the 'other' in the shape of International EAL students is increasing dramatically. For example, at The University of Adelaide in second semester 2006, 47% of undergraduate Finance and 39% of undergraduate Commerce students were international students (Working Party, 2007).

Whilst it has been argued that EAL students evidence difficulties using English, it is a fallacy to suggest that theirs is simply a 'second language problem' that can be addressed by remedial English and generic academic support. Learning tasks are situated in specific socio-cultural environments and research has shown that assessment is particularly affected by context (Gibbs, 1999). Assessment not only reveals student knowledge and skills, but also student compliance with culturally embedded institutional expectations. Students who do not have the necessary "cultural capital" can be disadvantaged by assessment practices with implicit cultural expectations. In addition, students lacking domain-based knowledge, i.e. the specific field of knowledge or knowledge base of a particular discipline, will also experience numerous learning difficulties. EAL students in particular are likely to have domain-based knowledge that is very different from their Australian counterparts and lecturers. Therefore, in order to make assessment work for increasingly diverse student populations, critical reflection on current assessment practices and the theoretical models that underpin these practices is essential (Gibbs, 1999). This paper examines three models of provision for EAL students that manifested in the South African context, their assessment implications and possible implications for pedagogy and assessment in an Australian context.

The Academic Support Model

In 1986, black students made up less than 5% of the total student population at white universities in South Africa (Moodie, 1994). Boughey (2007) describes how English liberal universities provided academic support for the minority of black South African students who had been disadvantaged by Apartheid education. However, despite the laudable goals of non-discrimination and providing equal access to the academy, the underlying discourse of these programs was one of 'student deficit' in relation to a perceived homogenous elite university community (Boughey, 2007; Volbrecht & Boughey, 2007). Provisions included in the Academic Support (AS) model ranged from generic university foundation programs prior to starting courses to generic language and academic skills workshops and/or individual consultations during courses with all of these provisions aimed at 'helping' the disadvantaged student to achieve the requirements of the academy. These programs were generally external to the mainstream academy and staffed by 'support staff' as opposed to academics (Boughey, 2007).

With respect to assessment, students were expected to comply with the assessment expectations of the institution and any external learning support given was directed towards achieving those ends. Formal summative methods such as exams and tests which focus on the product rather than the process of learning were used with no critical reflection or questioning of such practices.

The Academic Development Model

By 1999, 59% of students at South African universities were black EAL students (Carr, 1999). Although some institutions, most notably Afrikaans-medium universities that had fewer black students still followed the Academic Support model, most universities realised that this model was unviable in a situation where the majority of students could be described as "underprepared" in terms of the previous model. Therefore, many universities implemented what Boughey (2007) dubs the Academic Development (AD) model of provision. In this model, language and academic skills are infused or incorporated into the mainstream curriculum in order to integrate the student into the academic culture of the institution.

This assimilation or integration process fits or moulds the student to the institution (Zepke & Leach, 2005). This is achieved by Academic Language and Learning professionals working in

collaboration with subject experts, where language and study skills are incorporated within the discipline itself and explicitly taught across the mainstream curriculum. Extra support can also be provided in the form of drop-in centres, additional workshops or tutorials based on student needs as well as discipline-specific foundation courses.

With respect to assessment, the main difference between the AS and AD models is that explicit instruction and assistance is now given within the specific disciplines themselves. There is no longer a delegating of responsibility to external support staff. There is also recognition of the need to unpack the cultural assumptions underlying specific assessment tasks. Furthermore, although assessment practices continue to have a traditional summative focus, acceptance of new assessment methods is also evident. For example, features such as oral presentations are seen to appear in disciplines where such features are deemed part of that culture

It can thus be seen that this integrative AD model, whilst incorporating many worthy features, does not question institutional teaching practices at all. Instead, it is accepted that it is the students who need to adjust and conform to the accepted practices of the institution within their specific discipline.

The Higher Education Development Model

The Higher Education Development (HED) model has emerged in South Africa in the past five years, although the AS and AD models are still prevalent at many institutions. In the HED model, the focus shifts from counselling the student to "counselling the system" (Carr, 1999), thus emphasising the need for changes in policy and practice within institutions. It is no longer just the student who is expected to change to meet the expectations of the academy; rather the possibility exists for the academy to change to meet the needs of the student. The focus in this emerging discourse of adaptation is clearly on the institution itself changing as it accommodates diverse student needs (Zepke & Leach, 2005).

Reasons for this shift in policy within institutions vary from a pragmatic desire to cut costs and thus avoid the expense of academic support programs or infused disciplinary academic development, to more idealistic goals of democratisation and globalisation. Such goals acknowledge that genuine internationalisation involves mutual respect and mutual change and genuine democratisation in South Africa requires institutional policy changes to meet the needs of the new social order (Boughey, 2007; Boughey & Volbrecht, 2007).

The HED model involves the re-visiting and critical interrogation of current accepted teaching practices. With respect to assessment, a critical theoretical perspective is adopted as the question is asked: "whose interests do the assessment practices serve, those of the institution or of the students?" (McKellar, 2003). Furthermore, a relevant consideration is "whether the assessment practices are valid; whether assessment is being used to develop as well as to judge learning; whether the assessment practices are transparent" (McKellar, 2003).

In practical terms, in order to answer such questions affirmatively, it becomes necessary to supplement traditional summative assessment practices with formative and individualised tasks. It also means that some more seemingly 'progressive' assessment tasks such as oral assessment need to be re-evaluated to examine whether they are indeed equitable for all students.

The Australian Context

In Australia, the number of international EAL students has increased dramatically from less than 1% of the total student population in 1986 to 22.4% of the total students enrolled in 2004 (IDP, 2004). Like South Africa, there are varied accommodation models for these students at Australian universities. Pre-enrolment programs which focus on academic English and academic skills development predominate, although increasingly infused programs within disciplines have become popular. However, the majority of programs still focus on the international student and their supposed deficit, rather than on the development of all students. Nonetheless, there is a growing awareness within some institutions that changes in policy and practice are necessary in order for Australian institutions to be genuinely international, both contributing to and learning from the global academy. In this way, the 'other' is seen to be slowly becoming the mainstream.

Merging the AD and HED models: An international pedagogical approach for Higher Education in Australia

A merger of the two models entails a modification of existing pedagogical theories of integration to include institutional adaptation (Zepke & Leach, 2005). This approach, which incorporates the AD model's contribution of explicit instruction and the HED model's recognition of the necessity for institutional adaptation to meet student needs, ensures that a genuine international focus is placed on student learning. Indeed, this is the underlying pedagogical basis: internationalisation, which requires a change in organisational culture and which involves both changes in academic practice as well as the promotion of "authentic cross-cultural understanding through interaction, communication and engagement within and among student and staff communities university wide" (Eisenchlas, Trevaskes & Liddicoat, 2003).

It thus becomes essential for staff to develop an appreciation and acceptance of any cultural differences that exist. Indeed, lecturers need to be aware of their own academic culture and the fact that they are already an 'insider' in the academy with their own established cultural capital and discipline-specific knowledge. All of this needs to be shared explicitly with the students. At the same time, different academic styles of learning need to be acknowledged and accommodated.

A key assumption is therefore that EAL students should not be viewed as deficient or *tabula rasa* ready to be changed by the system. Instead, recognition needs to be given of their existing knowledge base, their particular skills and experiences – their "conceptions of reality" (Laurillard, 1993) or "prior knowledge" (Dochy, 2002) which equipped them very well in their own countries. The challenge is for these students to "maintain their identity in their culture of origin, retain their social networks outside the institution, have their cultural capital valued by the institution and experience learning that fits with their preferences" (Zepke & Leach, 2005). It is the institution itself that takes up this challenge and facilitates this.

Assessment implications of the merging of the two models

Assessment is central to the student's university experience and in commenting on Boud's statement that "assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor" (Boud, 1988), McKellar (2002) notes that "the power of assessment as a means of directing student learning cannot be under-valued". If we bear in mind that, although students might possibly be able to escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot escape the effects of poor assessment (Boud,

1995), it is critically important to assess the implications of the AD and HED models on assessment practices.

A starting point is to firstly understand the extent of the students' existing knowledge base. This can be achieved by, for example, testing their understanding and prior knowledge of the subject matter of a particular course at the beginning of the term (Dochy, 2002). The feedback received could then be used to devise suitable learning strategies to assist those students identified whose skills, knowledge and cultural capital differs from that of the academy.

The following inclusive assessment strategies take both the AD and HED models into consideration as they make provision for both integration (AD model) and adaptation (HED model).

- Assessment methods should be carefully chosen and in order to accommodate diverse students, a range of assessment methods should be considered. Increased use of formative assessment, which could include peer and self review, and where students get a chance to 'practise' answering questions and acquire valuable feedback prior to being summatively assessed, is recommended.
- The content of the assessment questions should not contain specific cultural references that could confuse students with a knowledge base arising from a different political, social and economic world to the lecturer. Thus factual question scenarios which implicitly embody cultural assumptions should be avoided. Alternatively, if the scenarios are important to the disciplinary context, underlying assumptions should be explicitly taught. The key to ensuring culturally-free assessment questions is developing an awareness of the cultural assumptions that underlie one's own discipline. Reflecting on one's own cultural 'pre-programming' and developing an understanding of the 'cultural encoding' of others (McLean & Ransom, 2005) will allow for an inclusive, flexible and empathetic approach to be adopted in the design of appropriate assessment tasks.
- The language used in assessment tasks should be accessible to the students. It is suggested that neutral language and plain, simple English should be used. Language should also not contain any colloquial expressions and sentences, should be clearly constructed, free from ambiguity with a limited number of adjectives. Creative language that serves no purpose should be avoided.
- An explicit identification of which subject specific language students need to know, as opposed to colloquial or idiosyncratic language which they don't need, should be made. This language needs to be explicitly taught to them. For example, novice law students need to be explicitly taught that when they are asked to give 'advice' on an issue, what is required of them is not just a factual argument, but one that is substantiated by legal authority. The student needs to be explicitly taught how to reason according to the law which involves finding a relevant legal rule and applying it to the material facts in order to reach a conclusion.
- Explicit instructions about how to go about completing an assessment task that are clear and understandable to all students should be provided. Clear and specific guidance as to what the assessor's expectations are should be given and it is suggested that examples of assessment pieces that model relevant and appropriate content, structure and language features be made available to the students.
- Fair criteria which focus on content and rhetorical structure should be utilised in oral assessments rather than an evaluation of factors such as fluency or eye contact, since

students from an EAL background might find it difficult to express themselves fluently in oral presentations and eye contact is not acceptable in some cultures.

- Appropriate feedback is important especially given the position of power and status that assessors have. An unequal power relationship exists between assessor and student with unilateral and final judgments being made by the assessor. This situation is not conducive to promoting students as autonomous and independent learners and thus such power needs to be limited (Boud, 1995). Various ways of achieving this include ensuring that any interaction with the student is supportive, friendly and non-threatening. Thus formative assessment becomes a particularly useful tool.

The principle implication of the AD and HED models is that the onus is on the teaching staff to develop equitable assessment practices that are appropriate for their students. This can be achieved by providing explicit support and instruction, but also by recognising that institutional reform is necessary. Indeed, assessment practices need to be adapted to the changing student body by making assessment more inclusive and by re-designing assessment tasks and incorporating or infusing discipline specific language, support and guidance into the assessment process itself.

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