Understanding academic competence in overseas students in the UK

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Much second language teaching today takes place using a task-based syllabus. Such an approach can only be effective if students are also obliged to engage actively with the forms and structure of the language they wish to learn, and with their own evolving versions of it. Furthermore, specific language outcomes need to be defined if achievements are to be reliably measured. Both these criteria can be met in the context of English for Academic Purposes, providing a distinction is made between academic training and English language development. The former will not necessarily enhance the latter; nor does proficiency in the latter presuppose competence in the former. Both need to be addressed separately, although this can be done in a complementary way. Just as significantly, attention must be given to the basic academic competence which underlies the skills overtly practised in a typical Study Skills programme.

In a book now famous in its field, Bernard Spolsky (1989) listed exhaustively those conditions which needed to be fulfilled for second language learning to take place effectively and efficiently. The list drew on research and experience spanning the previous 20 years, during which time English Language Teaching (ELT), from being a relatively minor and peripheral academic activity, had become a major subject of interest in universities and colleges around the world. It stipulated that 74 specific conditions should be in place in order to have optimal achievement of the above objective. These took account of various factors: the environmental (such as learning context and exposure to the target language); the social (such as cultural background and socio-economic status); the personal (such as age and aptitude); and, where teaching was involved, the academic (such as teaching style and prior classroom experience). While learning could take place if some of these conditions did not pertain, it would do so less successfully. Spolsky's work, with that of other academics, had the effect of making explicit in a detailed way the fact that learning a modern, living language is a complex and unpredictable business, implying in consequence that teaching one is even more so.

The task-based syllabus

Over the years different methods of learning and teaching have evolved to deal with this challenge, each seeming to offer a better solution than the previous one; each, in turn, has enjoyed only partial success, and has had to admit its limitations. Indeed, by the time that Spolsky had

produced his overview, it was clear that no one teaching methodology alone could hope to provide a convincing answer to the simple question of how language learners can best be helped to learn a second language: informed eclecticism was becoming the new order of the day, with a deliberate eschewal of prescribed methods. Reflecting on this from a later perspective, Beaumont and Wright (1998: 70) comment that

> [ELT] has been blighted by a fruitless search for methodological certainty. What is recommended is an anti-methods pedagogy that is not enslaved by the rigidity of teaching models.

The teacher, rather than the method, is now centre-stage, although instruction *per se* has come to be seen as of peripheral importance, with much greater notice being taken of the other factors highlighted by Spolsky, and often referred to as Individual Differences (IDs). It has become the teacher's job not so much to teach as to stage-manage or compensate for these IDs, so creating an environment in which learning will take place of its own accord, the central focus being the task. Set a task, it is argued, as authentic as possible, and to be completed in the target language, which obliges learners to negotiate meaning and close information gaps, and proficiency in the language will increase naturally in response to the demands made on it. This was the idea behind the Bangalore Project in India, organized by N. S. Prabhu:

> ... the development of competence in a second language requires not systemization of language inputs or maximization of planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication. (Prabhu 1987: 1)

The project enjoyed some success, but criticism soon followed. Beretta (1992: 264) argued that Prabhu had not conducted a proper evaluation. No clear learning outcomes had been specified, and so it was impossible to assess whether the project had achieved its objectives.

Two language systems

This raised a serious point about task-based teaching in general. If language goals were left open, subsumed imprecisely under notions such as fluency and communicative competence, how could the efficacy of the approach be measured with any accuracy? As a result of this uncertainty, it began to be doubted that task-based activity really did produce the kind of improvement that was claimed. Moreover, continuing research in the field of Second Language Acquisition began to confirm what had been vaguely hinted at on various occasions in the past (Skehan 1998: 34), that people actually dispose of two discrete language systems: the one, which is rule-based, generates and manipulates syntax and grammar; the other, which is exemplar-based, stores pre-formulated chunks of language, set phrases, and well-used items, which are produced singly or in groups as the situation demands. The second is quicker, and is more frequently used since, in fact, we rarely need to produce genuinely new pieces of language. As Lewis (1997: 11) says

> Modern analyses of real data suggest that we are much less original in using language than we like to believe. Much of what we say, and a

> significant proportion of what we write, consists of pre-fabricated multi-word items.

What happens, then, in task-based activities such as those which Prabhu orchestrated, and which can be found occurring in many ELT classrooms, where no precise language learning outcome is specified, is that learners rely on their exemplar-based system of familiar expressions in order to get by, since communication rather than correctness is the paramount consideration:

> [Learners] are not ... using some linguistic model to retrieve meaning comprehensively and unambiguously. Instead they cope with the problem of having to process language in real time by employing a variety of strategies which will probably combine to be effective ... (Skehan 1998: 14)

Since the language chunks used are often incorrect or inauthentic (as is typically the case in pidgin), this exercise, rather than aiding valid second language development, actually encourages fossilization of existing errors. Fluency may increase, but at the expense of confirming learners in bad habits, which become increasingly difficult to break. This is particularly true if the language required to perform the task adequately is simply beyond the learners' grasp. In this case, any attempt to improve their existing knowledge base must be sacrificed to the more pressing demands of task-fulfilment. Such failure to address learners' real language needs in this kind of scenario is essentially the point made by Swan in his general critique of Communicative Methodology, within which tradition the task-based syllabus is located. He argues that learners know instinctively how to communicate; what they don't have, but need as non-native speakers, is the language to do so effectively (Swan 1985).

Critical engagement with the language

In order, therefore, to ensure that a learner's mastery of the second language, not just their adeptness at employing short-cut communication tactics, really increases, it is necessary to involve the rule-based system within their knowledge base in the task completion process. Learners should engage in appropriate tasks that oblige them to pay attention to form at some stage of the exercise. This is not as easy as it may sound, since if a task is to remain authentic and valid, learners should not feel artificially constrained to produce target language. Leaving them free to do as they wish means that one can only predict a probable rather than a certain use of given language items. However, this can be remedied to some extent in feedback sessions, where it can be suggested that alternative language strategies would have been more effective. The same, or a similar, task can then be repeated, with learners making deliberate use of the recommended forms and procedures, on the basis of the Practise–Teach–Practise paradigm. In this case the constraint is self-imposed and functional, so the exercise may be considered authentic and student-centred.

When learners are thus required to analyse, reflect on, and adjust the operation of their rule-based system within the second language (their *interlanguage* as it is often called), real improvements in proficiency take place (Skehan 1998: 284). This is certainly the author's own experience.

In classroom research on learner strategies conducted in three different locations (a Foundation programme at the University of the UAE, an exam preparation course at a private language school in the UK, and a foundation course for overseas students at UWIC), the author found that the only strategies which correlated significantly with end-of-course test scores were those which involved paying attention to and deliberately manipulating the target language system in order to achieve better results, which outcome was in turn monitored (Sowden 1998: 28). It is a matter of active learning: if progress is to be achieved, there must be critical engagement with the target language structure. The learner must be willing to take at least partial ownership of the learning process, and be committed in some degree to self-development. Readiness to make this commitment, of course, depends on a variety of factors, but above all, especially in the dynamic context of the classroom, it is motivation that counts. Whatever strengths and abilities a learner may possess will only come into play if that learner chooses to employ them, if they actually care enough to wish to apply themselves and improve.

Professional competence or language proficiency?

One key aspect of motivation in learning a second language is its instrumental value. This is particularly true with English, which is now a virtual prerequisite for the ambitious in so many fields of activity around the world. This last fact largely explains the huge explosion over the last 15 years in courses of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which offer vocational or professional English language training. Typical course titles might be 'English for Engineers', 'English for Medicine', 'English for Business', and so on.

Not only do these programmes tend to encourage instrumental motivation, for obvious reasons, but they also provide real-life parameters which can be used to help structure a valid task-based syllabus, where specific language outcomes are defined and can be assessed. A problem arises, however, when students fail. If a student does not acquire the hoped-for competence in a given ESP, is it because they lack the requisite language skills or perhaps have not been active learners, or is it because they are poor engineers, doctors, or business people?

This is a particularly pertinent question with regard to one particular strain of ESP, namely English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which is an area of great growth. As Higher Education in the UK recruits growing numbers of overseas students, courses to prepare them for, and support them in English-medium education, begin to proliferate. Often these courses do not achieve the results they are designed to, and a significant number of students have serious difficulties in their early studies, and cause great problems for all involved (Blue 1993: 9). The natural reaction on the part of the institutions, and the tutors there, is to blame such failure on a lack of English language skills, and the common proposed solution is to increase the number of hours of compulsory language tuition. For reasons explained above, this is not always a helpful step. Indeed, in the EAP context, it may miss the point altogether. Overseas students often fail to write good essays, to conduct themselves effectively in seminars, or to manage their research well, not primarily because

their English is weak, but because, in Western terms, they are weak students: they do not know how to study. Not infrequently they come from a culture which does not prize or encourage self-direction or independence of mind; does not train students in how to use sources without plagiarizing; does not help them to assemble original arguments from the critical use of evidence; does not, in short, fit them to study in a university in the West.

Dealing with such a shortfall in skills, particularly if the students are not academically able even within the norms of their own culture, is no easy matter: fostering self-reliance and critical thinking is a long process, and is not achieved by simple language lessons.

> ... the explanation that 'poor English' is the basic cause of the academic problems of most overseas students is clearly inadequate; and, in our experience, additional English courses seldom resolve their problems either. Masked by language problems lie the much deeper problems of adjusting to a new intellectual culture, a new way of thinking and of processing knowledge to meet the expectations inherent in the Anglo education system. Foreign students come not merely from other language backgrounds but, more importantly, from other cultural backgrounds. (Ballard 1996: 150)

Indeed, it could be argued that the kind of repetition and mimicry involved in much traditional language teaching, even in EAP, reinforces exactly those kinds of study practice one would wish to see undermined (ibid.: 155). It is for this reason that some EAP practitioners are now calling for this discrepancy between language needs on the one hand, and academic needs on the other, to be made more explicit than the usual Study Skills course allows:

> Maybe we need to develop a special English for Intellectual Purposes (EIP) syllabus which will introduce [students] to the intellectual skills they will require and the study adjustments they must make if they are to be successful students in an unfamiliar foreign language and foreign culture institution. This syllabus would vary from the current EAP courses in that it would focus primarily on the nature of the cognitive acts required by specific tasks and assignments set within a distinctive academic context or discipline ... Students would be introduced first to the intellectual demands of university work and then given practice in the language structures they will require to meet these demands. (Ballard 1996: 64)

This means that initial support work with overseas students should concentrate on developing academic rather than linguistic proficiency, it being recognized that 'a high level of language competence will not in itself generate sophisticated thought' (ibid: 162). Of course, providing that this notional distinction is kept clear, work on academic skills can have great language benefits. The Practise–Teach–Practise paradigm is appropriate for all task-based instruction, in relation to both professional and language matters. Thus a student presenting an academic paper can be given feedback on both presentation technique and use of language, which can then be worked on together in that context.

Reappraisal: competence not skills

The provision of such academic training, as we have seen, usually takes place in the context of a study skills programme, which will tend to deal with the critical retrieval, organization, and presentation of information, and focus in a very explicit way on skills such as essay writing, note-taking, making presentations, and so on. Perhaps, though, it is time to reconsider this model, and to give closer attention to those abilities which underlie these overt skills.

In recent years some authors and practitioners who have spent much of their professional lives guiding would-be tutors and students on the principles of perfect paragraph writing, and other such academic accomplishments have begun to question whether the whole of the traditional approach to EAP is essentially flawed. In a key paper entitled *ESP at the Crossroads*, first published in 1980 and reproduced in Swales (1985), Hutchinson and Waters doubted 'whether a study of Mechanical Engineering texts is the best way to prepare students for a course in Mechanical Engineering' (Swales 1985: 175). Until then, this kind of specialist repertoire had been the basis of the ESP syllabus. Now, though, they argued that such an approach 'is mistaken because it confuses *what the students are expected to cope with* (the actual language) with *what the students need in order to cope* (background knowledge or underlying competence)' (ibid.: 176) [italics in original]. There needs to be a proper distinction between ends and means. Defining underlying competence as 'an ability to receive and transmit information effectively through integrated combinations of visual, oral and written media' (ibid.: 181), they went on to propose that a shift of focus in ESP teaching should occur away from 'the surface structures of technical discourse to the underlying interpretive strategies required to cope with such discourse and from the specific language and content of the "academic" text to the more generative knowledge and language of popular technology in whatever form it may be expressed' (ibid.).

At first glance this would seem to be merely an argument in favour of a general rather than a specialized approach to EAP, which in one sense it was. However, an important ingredient of this underlying competence was said to be Knowledge of the World (ibid.), which students inevitably brought with them to their studies, and which could not be easily compensated for if lacking. There was also the recognition that academic topics *per se* might not always be the most appropriate for even university students to study. This apparent advocacy of general rather than academic English, together with allowance for the influence of factors which do not readily respond to targeted instruction, was made more explicit, and taken further in a later article.

The successful student

By 1992 Waters (Waters and Waters 1992: 265) had moved from asking 'What skills do students need in order to study effectively?' to 'What does a successful student do that a less successful student does not do?' He then lists (ibid.) what experience, feedback from colleagues, and research have suggested are the main characteristics of successful students:

They typically:

- have a high degree of self-awareness

- are good at critical questioning
- tend to have an 'adult' approach to relations with their teachers
- think clearly and logically
- are self-confident
- impose their own framework on study data
- have a positive attitude to their studies
- are willing and able to teach themselves
- are intelligent

He comments on this list as follows (ibid.):

> The most significant point for us was the *overall nature* of the items ... The profile of the successful student that had emerged was *not* first and foremost that of a proficient user of study techniques. Rather, it was of a mature, balanced individual, possessing an open, questioning mind, and willing to adopt an active, independent approach to study. (italics in original)

Traditional study skills remain important, of course, but

> ... such techniques can only be deployed effectively by someone who is *already* a successful student in terms of the qualities in the profile. (ibid.: italics in original)

These observations would not seem remarkable to the average ELT practitioner, who has long realized that attitude, application, and intelligence play a major if not determining role in effective language learning. In the context of EAP, though, Water's assertion that such aspects of underlying competence need to be in place before the teaching of study techniques can hope to be worthwhile, represents a challenge to the basic assumption of many pre-sessional and in-sessional support courses for overseas students. Attention, it seems, should be focused primarily on developing a student's confidence, critical thinking, and self-direction skills, rather than on honing techniques of note-taking and essay-writing. Work on general English, if it achieves these aims, should perhaps take precedence over academic English where this does not.

A different approach

The fact that students do go through traditional EAP programmes, and do not always emerge much more successful in such skills at the other end, indicates that Water's argument may well be valid, and is certainly worth taking seriously. But how feasible is a different approach in the university context? Given their common reluctance to follow EAP courses, students are probably going to need to feel they are gaining concrete, measurable, benefits from their efforts, which are best represented by work on specific study skills. There is a danger that work of a more general, rather vague nature, which offers fewer obvious returns, is going to be less saleable. The fact that the EAP coursebook subsequently produced by Alan and Mary Waters (1995), while different in emphasis, does not differ markedly in content from the traditional fare, suggests that they recognize this danger too. Furthermore, some of

the qualities listed in the profile defy easy reduction to attainable course goals: the development of students' critical thinking and self-reliance are important objectives, but, as already mentioned, this is a long-term process which may bear fruit only gradually; intelligence, self-confidence, positive attitude, and willingness to take responsibility for learning, are also very difficult to quantify within an assessed syllabus. This is not say that such a syllabus cannot be devised, only that it might not be possible to subject it to the same constraints or expectations. Furthermore, if it is then going to be accompanied or followed by traditional EAP fare, it is likely that the whole programme will require much more time than is usually allowed.

The present challenge

The questions raised here are particularly important at the moment. As market forces are pushing down what is considered an acceptable academic level for students recruited to UK universities, the issue of underlying competence is becoming critical. No longer can we assume that overseas students coming to Britain are going to have a good basic command of the language, and be enthusiastic and hard-working, needing only some orientation on study skills, and a little repair work along the way in order to cope successfully with higher education. Increasingly they are likely to be those who have studied in English for many years, but not achieved any real mastery of that language; they may not be particularly motivated or ready to face up to the challenge of study overseas; they will not necessarily have gained the academic results usually expected of their British counterparts. If they have not reached an appropriate level of competence, this may be due to the lack of exactly those key qualities identified by Waters, which state of affairs may in turn be due to a variety of cultural, affective, intellectual, and educational factors. If indeed they have not done so, then the challenge of overturning or reversing well-established patterns of thinking, as well as fossilized use of language and set attitudes, in time for substantial benefits to be felt on any current course of study, is going to need a major commitment and effort from the institutions involved.

An effective response of this kind, however, is at present undermined by the kind of confusion highlighted earlier in this article: that between linguistic and academic proficiency. Given the all-too-common failure to recognize or accept this distinction, then it is hardly surprising that the policies of recruitment, and the mechanisms of support for overseas students, are still too casual and make-shift, and so very prone to lead to disappointment for all concerned.

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