COLLABORATIVE TEACHING IN ACADEMIC WRITING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

This presentation proposes a form of co-operation that has proved productive in the postgraduate academic writing courses at the National University of Rio Cuarto. In these courses the language needs of the learners are attended to by taking advantage of the content knowledge that they already possess. The learners’ attention is focused on the linguistic aspects related to the research article genre by directing them to observe the phenomena in articles in their own fields.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of writing in English for researchers is well known. This importance is given by the fact that the research process is not considered complete until the findings have been written down as an article and made known to the scientific community through publication in a specialised journal, integrating to the existing literature on the topic. Thus, publication is vital and essential for the researchers and for their careers. But not only is publication important. The audience and quality of the journal, measured through its impact factor, also counts. When researchers wish to reach wide audiences or very specialised audiences, the need to publish in English becomes most obvious. Also, when the quality of the journal, measured through its impact factor, is considered, the need to publish in English becomes more evident, as 80% of the journals that are scanned by the Institute of Scientific Information,
(ISI) to build the Science Citation Index (SCI) publish in English, and the most quoted publications are those written in English (Swales, 1990). This reality has generated an increasing demand for EAP/ESP (English for Academic Purposes/English for Specific Purposes) in academic contexts, particularly the teaching of academic writing and of research process genres.

However, teaching how to write science is not an easy task. The main difficulty that practitioners have to face in these courses is the problem posed by the depth of highly specialised content. In EAP/ESP instruction various forms of co-operation between language teachers and subject specialists have developed to help solve this difficulty, that is, the difficulty of an EAP/ESP teacher, who is not an expert in Biology, Medicine or Engineering, having to teach professionals or doctoral students how to write academic papers in their fields of specialism. Dudley-Evans and St.John (1998) suggest three levels of co-operation for the integration of subject-specific content to the teaching of skills common to all the disciplines: co-operation, collaboration and team-teaching. Co-operation requires the familiarisation of the language teacher with the contents of the subject courses, and the occasional introduction of material related to the subject course. Collaboration involves working together with a subject specialist, to prepare the students for a subject class or a skill, or to back up the students with difficulties emerging from a subject class. Team-teaching involves the integration of language and content by the joint effort of subject and language specialists.

This co-operative instruction is possible in contexts where classes are taught in English by subject specialists who are native speakers of English. However, this co-operation appears difficult to implement in academic contexts where English is a foreign language, as the case of Argentina and most Latin American countries. In this part of the globe, all undergraduate and graduate courses are taught in the native language of the country, native speakers of English are difficult to encounter, and it is even more difficult to count on native speakers of English who are specialists in the different fields.
Our experience indicates that the higher the level of the learners in their academic careers, the greater the difficulties that the teacher experiences in coping with academic content. These learners are interested in highly specialised information, requiring the background of the specialist for interpretation, and as a consequence, it is difficult for a teacher of English to find material that will be interesting for learners with different scientific backgrounds and at the same time accessible to the teacher herself/himself.

In this presentation I propose a form of collaboration that I am implementing in the academic writing courses for postgraduate programs that I run at the National University of Rio Cuarto. In this form of collaboration the students act as the subject specialist, contributing their knowledge of their specialised fields of study to the course, while the teacher acts as the language specialist, contributing his/her knowledge of genre, discourse, and grammar to the course.

AIMS OF THE COURSE

The course," El artículo de investigación de diseño experimental en inglés. De la toma de conciencia a la producción escrita" is part of the curriculum of the PhD degree of Biological Science at the Faculty of Exact Sciences at the National University of Río Cuarto, Argentina. It may also be attended by researchers of other areas that do experimental research, such as Agronomy, Veterinary and Chemistry. The aim of the course is to raise awareness about the rhetorical and linguistic structures associated with the experimental research article and other scientific genres, and the social factors that determine their use. That is, the course is focused on language, not content. So, the teacher attends to the language needs of the learners by taking advantage of the content knowledge that they already possess through carefully constructed lessons. He/she focuses the learners’ attention on the linguistic aspects related to the research article genre by making them aware
of the linguistic characteristics of the genre, and then he/she directs them to observe and analyse the phenomena in articles in their own fields. The learners’ knowledge of the specific disciplinary content is the point of departure, and constitutes the learners’ contribution to the course.

THE LEARNERS

The learners that participate of this course hold graduate degrees, do research in specific areas of knowledge, may have experience in publication either in Spanish, in English or in both, and are competent readers of subject-specific content in English. These learners obviously do not need to learn content through English. Their concern is with publication. They need to write research articles in English that meet the characteristics of publishable material. They have linguistic needs, not content needs.

THE TEACHER

In these courses, the teacher acts as materials designer, generating ad-hoc materials for the course, adapting the findings of research on genre analysis to make them accessible to non-specialists. He/she also acts as a facilitator, providing materials and input activities that serve the purpose of raising learners’ awareness about the linguistic and rhetorical characteristics of the most used genre of the academy, the experimental research article (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998). This awareness is developed comparing and contrasting features within the stages of the genre or comparing and contrasting features with those of other research-related genres.

Finally, the teacher contributes to the analysis, synthesis and discussion of the discoursal and rhetorical aspects of the texts.

THE MATERIALS
The materials are developed based on research findings about the research article. They are designed to raise awareness about generic aspects of the text, rhetorical features and the characteristic grammatical and lexical choices. Also, a common research article selected on a topic that may be accessible to all the students is provided. This paper is used to, through pair work, make a first approximation to the transference of what has been learned. They also have an article of their specific areas of specialism, which they have been required to contribute to work individually or in pairs. This is an article which that they can contextualise in the science since they know its importance for the field, they understand its relevance in relation to existing knowledge, they know the author as well as how he/she is positioned in the scientific community.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

The theoretical basis for the course is provided by the three main schools interested in genre for pedagogical purposes: New Rhetoric, ESP, Systemic Functional Linguistics (Hyon, 1996). These schools have contributed studies aimed at developing a clearer understanding of the genres of the academy, and through this understanding, being able to help different types of learners.

The course is taught in 40 classroom hours, and has two credits for postgraduate level careers. It is designed to develop genre awareness (Bekenkotter and Huckin, 1995) of the macro and micro features of the RA. Awareness is raised by comparing similar or different realisations across sections of the experimental research article or comparing with other science related genres to help researchers.

The point of departure is the learners’ knowledge of content and genres of the academy. As they are researchers or doctoral students, they
have acquired sophisticated knowledge of specialised fields and have had a rich exposure to the genres of the academy, i.e., theses, research papers, reviews, letters, patents, abstracts, proposals, popular science articles, and others.

The object of study of the course is the experimental Research Article (RA) in English. The focus is on its characteristic rhetorical and linguistic features, emphasising the differences in the language employed in the sections. These differences are explained in relation to the sections’ aims and to the cultural context of which the article forms part: the scientific community. Also, the characteristics of other science-related genres are studied, with the purpose of comparing their distinguishing features with those the features of the research article.

From the knowledge of the macro and micro linguistic structures that are typically used in the RA, the learners move to writing based on informed observations of models (Masters, 1997). This is done first through guided models and then from the models provided by the learners’ specialised texts, to arrive at the independent production of sentences, paragraphs, sections and finally the whole article. Each participant is expected to produce an article in their own area of study.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

In the course the learners, who are in fact the content experts, interact with the teacher, the language expert. (Martínez, 2001, in press). The teacher contributes her knowledge of genre and of linguistic selections appropriate to each scientific genre. The learners contribute knowledge of their specialised field of science and the particular characteristics of the scientific community to which they belong or to which they wish to belong. This methodology results in courses where the participants are highly motivated, as they work with material that they are interested in and are familiar with. This also allows them
to concentrate their attention on aspects of language, rather than concentrating on meaning.

The course acts mainly as a bridge between reading and writing, through the development of genre awareness. It helps researchers and graduate students to improve the quality of their written research papers in English and promotes the writing of articles in English.

REFERENCES


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