

DEVELOPING A POLICY TO PROMOTE ACADEMIC LITERACIES IN ENGLISH AT TERTIARY LEVEL: A CASE STUDY

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Background

The past few decades have seen changes in the profile of the traditional tertiary student in New Zealand so that there is now a widening diversity in culture, language, and academic background among learners. One contributing factor is the growing number of international students coming into New Zealand universities. Another is the increased migration to NZ in the 90s, which has resulted in NZ students with more complex language profiles. Many New Zealand students may now start university after only a few years in English medium education. To compound this picture of a linguistically diverse group, university entrance regulations have, in the recent past, allowed students to enter university without qualifications in subjects which made demands on their English writing skills.

In this climate it can no longer be assumed that tertiary students know how to write a scientific report or an expository essay, how to acknowledge and discuss sources, how to present competing voices, and where to situate their own voice. Students from different cultures of education may not have learnt to evaluate a text critically or apply appropriate reading strategies to the volume of information they need to sift through. Many students beginning their tertiary studies now do not have the necessary skills to use English appropriately for academic purposes and require more support in their literacy skills than tertiary institutions have traditionally offered in the past.

Lea and Street (1998) point to the growing gap between faculty expectations and student understandings of what is required of them. They argue that literacy needs at the university are not just a consequence of the influx of non-traditional students. Literacy is at the core of understanding and communicating knowledge. It is "the competency that underlies and secures all major competencies" (Reid, 1993, p.13). Although tertiary educators may have been able to assume, in the past, that students bring literacy skills to their tertiary studies, many appear to have no clear agreement on the literacy requirements of their discipline (Lea & Street, 1998, Candlin, 1999). What exactly do teachers mean by reading critically and writing analytically? Do they clarify their expectations in their practices so that students can set themselves clear goals? Or do they assume that these skills are learnt by osmosis, by frequent interactions with those who model them? It cannot be assumed that these skills will improve without assistance (Holder et al., 1999) and such skills need to be integrated into tertiary study, into the curriculum and assessment of all programmes. Every teacher has a responsibility to focus both on the content and the language through which the content is conveyed and thereby promote student language development. In addition, if graduates have better literacy skills they will perform better professionally (Holder, Jones, Robinson, & Krass, 1999).

Academic literacy skills in English can be understood in terms of three models (Lea & Street, 1998) each one encompassing the last and broadening the conceptualisation. Firstly, the study skills model sees academic literacy as discrete skills in reading and

writing for academic purposes with an emphasis on the accuracy of language at surface level e.g. spelling and grammar. The second model focuses on academic socialisation, where the student is inducted into the ways of the academy as an apprentice and learns to communicate in a manner that is acceptable to the academy (Paltridge, 2002). This model suggests that the academy has one voice or embodies one culture. But it fails to address the “deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the production and representation of meaning” (Street 1999, np.). A third approach acknowledges that different disciplines have different ways of approaching and presenting knowledge (Lea & Street, 1998; Paltridge, 2002). For example, in science the authorial voice is traditionally absent or hidden behind the passive whereas in the social sciences the author may speak in the first person. Academic literacies, then, are social practices within each discipline. This approach stresses the importance of “investigat(ing) the understandings of both academic staff and students about their own literacy practices” (Lea & Street, 1998, p.158), rather than the students adapting to the university culture. It focuses on specific discourses, identities and values rather than skills or socialisation (Lea & Street, 1998; Paltridge, 2002). Each discipline needs to map its ‘universe of discourse’ (Swales, 2000, p.64) and language is seen not as an end itself but “as a means for understanding and constructing knowledge” (Zamel & Spack, 1998, p.x). Students may be required to switch practices between one setting and another (Street, 1999) and they will need to be familiar with different discipline conventions in order to do so.

Lillis (2003) argues against the traditional teacher-controlled, monologic approach to meaning making, suggesting that there is no single version of truth, and argues for a dialogue whereby students bring their own perspectives and are not bound by traditional frameworks (Lillis, 2003). This gives real meaning to Zamel and Spack’s (1998) contention that students need to be able to negotiate academic literacies if they are to engage fully in academic study.

One institutional context

Throughout the 90s at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), then Auckland Institute of Technology (AIT), a range of support systems and structures was developed to assist students to participate fully in academic study. The Learning Support Centre increased its range of support services for students. The School of Languages developed classes to prepare students with English as an additional language (EAL) for the demands of mainstream academic study in English and a diagnostic test to assess whether students were ready for study at certificate level.

However, the issues were complex as well as intransigent, and both staff and students continued to identify areas where effective teaching/learning relationships were compromised by lack of knowledge, understanding and support as well by inadequate student academic skills. Many student support services were stretched beyond capacity or were being used for purposes that they were not designed to fulfil. And teachers found that many EAL students responded differently to their routine teaching methods such as asking questions and facilitating discussions. They also noticed that time after class was rapidly becoming question time for students who did not want to ask questions in more public settings during class.

In 1999, Shona Little from the Centre for Educational & Professional Development (CEPD, at that time CPD) recognised that the issues needed to be addressed at the level of staff development as well as student support. Staff needed a much greater

understanding of the educational assumptions and expectations which lay behind the communication and classroom difficulties that they were experiencing. Funding was secured to second an experienced ESOL teacher to the CEPD staff to work with and support academic staff.

The initial task for the staff developer involved reading the research, listening to staff concerns and prioritising needs. This fact-finding revealed a growing awareness among staff of the complexities of teaching linguistically mixed groups. Not only did they need to modify their own language both in spoken delivery and in written materials, but they also needed to understand that they were inducting students into a culture of education.

(Cortazzi & Jin, 1997)

Staff concerns included the competing requirements, on the one hand, to increase student numbers in the new competitive environment and, on the other, to maintain literacy standards. Teachers did not know who to turn to if the student's language was not adequate for the programme. Some reacted to the poor writing ability of students by referring them to support services. Others reduced the writing demands of the programme. Few were adequately prepared to establish and teach the English literacy skills of their own discipline.

Teaching staff also reported a range of issues related to the growing cultural diversity in classes. There was a lack of participation by EAL students in class discussions. As a result, workshops were offered to assist staff with interactive strategies for multicultural classrooms. The aim was for staff to adapt their teaching so that EAL students were not silent passengers in a foreign classroom, but actively engaged with the language for their own learning. Group work was often problematic as students with very different approaches found themselves working side by side, and group assessment raised even more complex issues. There was a marked increase in plagiarism and cheating.

A picture was emerging which showed that students from different cultural backgrounds had more than just linguistic differences. They had different values, different understandings of tertiary study, different world views (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Ginsburg, 1992). Teaching staff wanted a greater understanding of these issues and strategies for their changing classroom practice. They needed support for the new demands on their teaching so that they could prepare all students with the language and cultural skills to interact in professional and academic settings.

Finding a solution

It was becoming clear that only by addressing issues also at an organizational level would the students' needs be met. Staff development alone was not enough to make systemic changes. Shona Little established a working group to examine the current situation and resolve what mechanism would best answer the requirements to support staff, cater for student needs, yet maintain standards. Any solution would ideally be flexible enough to accommodate the present as well as the future needs of an English medium university in an increasingly internationalised education system. Issues of Maori language and culture were already addressed in a policy on Te Reo Maori and a policy on Treaty of Waitangi issues. But other language issues such as the special needs of bilingual and multilingual students and English language development for all students were not addressed. It was resolved to develop an institutional policy on developing academic literacies so that these principles would be embedded in the organizational

structure of the university. Such a policy would acknowledge the consequences of demographic changes among university students (Reid, 1996). An explicit policy, it was hoped, would lead to a more coordinated approach to linguistic diversity so that staff and students' expectations were clear and university and student responsibilities defined. The policy would have positive benefits for all students and would provide effective development for all staff (Baldauf, 1997). It would encompass the range of issues that needed to be addressed, but be flexible enough to enable the faculties to implement it in a manner appropriate to their disciplines.

In 2000 an Australian expert, Ian Reid, was invited to raise awareness of language issues by giving workshops for staff and consulting with senior managers. An academic with a strong research profile in academic literacies, his position on the executive of his own university meant he also had valuable experience in policy development. He was in a position to help staff at the chalk face as well as to advise on policy making, and the timing of his visit facilitated both processes. By the end of that year the staff developers had met with programme teams from every faculty for discussions about language issues. Staff from a wide range of disciplines had been given an opportunity to voice their concerns.

University-wide ownership of the policy was enhanced during the period of policy development by a number of initiatives which contributed to a climate of interest and debate. A discussion forum was held on internationalisation, resources on language and culture were developed for staff, intercultural communication was addressed at staff induction as well as in the staff handbook. Data collection was refined so that more information was available about the linguistic and ethnic backgrounds of students. Language support for EAL students increased both centrally and within faculties, and the library acquired resources such as learner and bilingual dictionaries needed by a multicultural student body. There was a growing awareness among staff of the need for materials designed for students to be very clear and accessible to all, whether in handbooks, surveys, worksheets, assignment questions or exams. Institutional research forms which include EAL students are now routinely checked for language appropriate to the target group.

The literature suggests that the development of academic literacies needs to be addressed within each faculty in the context of individual disciplines and needs consistent support throughout the whole programme (Paltridge, 2002; Lea & Street, 1998; Reid, 1998; Candlin, 1997). A policy requiring all programmes to address the language requirements of their students through the learning outcomes and assessment criteria would be an appropriate way of setting clear language standards within each individual discipline.

So initially a policy was developed to provide guidelines on developing academic literacy skills at all levels and in all disciplines. However, it was clear to the working party that language was just one manifestation of the complexities of cultural difference and that academic literacy standards could not be addressed without acknowledging the cultural component. Languages could not be separated from the cultures they embody. The policy was to promote academic literacies in their discipline contexts rather than just language skills for academic study. Students needed to understand the cultural conventions of academic knowledge and specific discipline discourses, and staff needed to articulate them and develop strategies appropriate for the multicultural classroom. "The key to improving student literacy lies.... in exploring the fundamental relationship between the culture of knowledge and the language by which it is maintained and expressed" (Ballard

& Clanchy, 1988, p.7). As a result, the policy developed in two parts: academic literacies and cultural issues.

The policy

The policy, approved by Academic Board in December 2000, encompassed the two areas of language and culture and was entitled the Academic Literacies and Intercultural Capabilities (ALIC) Policy. It defines academic literacy as “the ability to use language appropriately to achieve particular academic, professional and vocational goals. It encompasses both oral and written language and focuses on the skills for communicating disciplinary knowledge in an English medium university” (Little, 2001, np.).

A further section defines intercultural capability as “the ability to accept and understand other cultures and to accept different approaches and attitudes in all areas of human interaction” (Little, 2001, np.).

The policy links language diversity with cultural factors and contextualises intercultural capability: “The ability to understand and interact effectively with people from a wide variety of cultures is an increasingly important professional skill and, as such, should be viewed as an essential graduate outcome for all university students” (Little, 2001, np.).

Through this policy AUT aims to ensure that:

- Subject teachers have support in the form of training opportunities, resource materials, and consultation with teachers trained in teaching ESOL.
- All programmes develop clear and appropriate language criteria and identify where and how academic literacy is developed within a programme.
- Staff accept their responsibilities as role models of the language and communication practices of their disciplines.
- Staff endeavour to understand the cultural norms which some students may bring to their learning. Student learning experiences need to enable them to understand the difference between the cultural assumptions they bring with them to AUT and the academic and professional norms or cultures of the discipline they are studying.
- Students’ learning experiences encourage their development of intercultural capabilities.
- Assessment criteria for academic literacy standards are developed in all programmes, clearly stated, and clearly communicated to students.
- Post graduate programmes address the language, supervision and isolation issues for all postgraduate students

(Little, 2001, np.).

Through the implementation of the policy, AUT aims to ensure appropriate graduate outcomes for academic literacies and intercultural capabilities and to support all staff in their own development of intercultural capabilities by providing them with effective professional development. This is seen as a key to helping staff react constructively to the changing needs of the student body. Teaching staff need to engage with and explicitly teach the literacy demands of their discipline. They also need to accept their responsibility for preparing students for a changing world by helping them develop their intercultural capabilities.

New developments for students

At the start of their tertiary studies all students are made aware of the assistance provided by student services, Te Tari Awhina: The Learning Centre. The Centre offers a comprehensive range of workshops and short courses specifically designed to help with academic literacy development. There is now a range of materials aimed at inducting students from very different cultures into the academic conventions of learning in English. A Self Access Learning Lab is widely patronised on both campuses with audio, video and computer resources for academic literacy and study skills.

Academic orientations are offered for new International students, who are provided with a wide range of information about studying in English, about Auckland and New Zealand to assist their transition to a new country. Over 990 students completed these programmes in 2002. A parallel but independent development has led to whanau and fono rooms on campus to support Maori and Pasifika students in their transition to university study.

The Library makes dictionaries readily available on all floors and a librarian now specialises in addressing the specific needs of students with English as an additional language. Library services conduct tours and tutorials for students to learn how to find, use and manage information for academic purposes.

Fiocco (1997) suggests a variety of models for how academic literacies can be taught and how content knowledge and language knowledge can be combined. At AUT many programmes run ESOL adjunct courses parallel to content courses, with language and content teachers working separately but co-operatively. In the Faculty of Business, for example, first language English speaking students study communication skills while EAL students attend parallel classes which focus on developing their academic literacies in English. A special programme fosters the academic support and pastoral care of Maori and Pasifika students. Some academic support targets EAL students from Asian countries. These support people are usually bilingual, and are often successful past students.

Following another model where the discipline teacher takes responsibility for inducting students into the discourse, the School of Art and Design incorporates a year-long content based academic literacies paper into their certificate course. The team includes staff with both content and ESOL expertise who teach on the studio component of the certificate as well.

Other programmes run special tutorials where staff focus on the academic language of the lecture material and give students the opportunity to use the discipline discourse.

New developments for staff

At the time of policy development, AUT was moving from being an institute of technology to becoming a university of technology. The advantage of its polytechnic role was that it specialised in small classes and emphasized the importance of teaching. This high priority historically given to teaching has led to a culture of staff seeking support for teaching issues. In this climate, staff development workshops are seen as a way of developing the necessary skills for the changing needs of the classroom.

Staff development workshops to promote academic literacy skills are tailored to the needs of the programme team, which gives colleagues the opportunity to explore the

issues within their own discipline context. Currently, when staff voice concerns about student language skills, a language needs analysis is distributed and collated by a staff developer. The results often give new insights into the real issues for students who have the opportunity to articulate their difficulties and often offer suggestions for how teachers can assist them understand lectures and take notes. Speaking in public is the issue they most frequently raise as an area of difficulty. A large majority of EAL students and many first language English speakers say they are nervous, lack quick thinking skills and adequate vocabulary to answer questions in class. Furthermore, even with preparation time, many students find oral presentations extremely difficult because of their fear of public speaking. For EAL students this is compounded by their self-consciousness about their accents and worry that they are incomprehensible. Many are not familiar with oral work at undergraduate level. Such concerns point to a need for more guidance and tutorial support. In all programmes where a language needs analysis has been carried out, teaching staff have benefited from a clearer understanding of their students' needs.

Many programmes seek staff development support to discuss issues in teaching culturally diverse classes and to evaluate strategies to make their teaching more effective. Both in newsletters and in workshops examples of good practice are disseminated. In the last few years, groups have met to discuss cultural aspects of group work and the development of intercultural capabilities. Materials have been developed to help staff implement strategies that support language learning without lowering standards or demanding too much extra time. Small adaptations, such as providing pre-reading materials or writing specialist words on the board, support understanding of the content and need not intrude on class time. Strategies that benefit EAL students can benefit all students (Zamel & Spack, 1998).

Allied staff play an important role in establishing an inclusive environment. They are at the frontline in offering services to students to enable them to enrol in courses and avail themselves of library information. This group at AUT most closely reflects the ethnic distribution in the wider community, and their own experiences of working in a multicultural workforce models the inclusive environment that the policy espouses. Workshops on interacting with people from other cultures prompt lively discussion about understandings of speech variations as well as non-verbal communication across cultures. Underpinning these sessions is the importance of adapting English language and its delivery to a multicultural world where EAL speakers now outnumber first language English speakers (MacArthur, 2002). Intercultural communication needs have led to workshops on the pronunciation of Chinese and Korean names in addition to the regular sessions on the pronunciation of Maori place names. Further workshops are planned for other ethnic groups. A seminar series entitled *Cultures of Education Around the World* was organised with staff from Maori, Pasifika, Indian, Chinese and Korean cultures presenting their experiences of their cultures of education and was attended by staff from all areas of the university. For staff who want to avail themselves of any of the above-mentioned developments a 'Helpline' has been established to direct them to appropriate services and web-based material.

Specialist ESOL training

Teaching staff are seen as central to resolving issues arising from national demographic changes in the student population and the internationalisation of education. Student diversity is a challenge for staff rather than just a student problem (de Wit, 1995; Reid,

1996), in that staff are challenged to understand more about the process of second language acquisition and the socio-cultural context in which languages are learned (Samway & McKeon, 1999). In order to support mainstream staff in developing this expertise, AUT piloted a pre-service language teacher training course in 2000. An existing course, the Certificate in Language Teaching to Adults (CLTA), was offered in adapted form to a small group of staff from each faculty so that they would be able to act as a resource for their school or programme. The majority of teachers who chose this course were already experienced teachers with qualifications in tertiary teaching who were seeking specific knowledge and skills to improve their practice in the multicultural classroom. Initially it was planned to adapt the ESOL certificate course to the needs of mainstream teachers but most of the participants wanted to gain an ESOL qualification to increase their employability when travelling overseas. The regular course caters for beginning ESOL teachers but as this target group were experienced practitioners from a range of disciplines, discussion often focused on the particular issues of their mainstream classes. The teachers gained an added understanding of second language learning principles, which enabled them to judge student language progress and student language needs more accurately.

Some of these ESOL trained staff have taken a leadership role in this area in their programmes, giving advice to peers, suggesting changes to materials, adapting the language of exam questions and initiating tutorial support. Some have led new developments in curriculum change, others have combined their discipline knowledge with a new interest in language and cultural influences, leading to new fields of research. Their greater understanding of EAL students' language needs has enriched the programmes they are working on.

This professional language teacher training is available in different modes throughout the year (summer courses or part-time for one or two semesters) for would-be ESOL teachers. Although the initiative exclusively for mainstream faculty has not been repeated, enrolment in the regular programme is available to university staff free of charge. A commitment to this ESOL training is well beyond the ten days of professional development time allocated to each staff member at AUT, but this was a model where both the institute and the teacher gained. The staff added a second string to their bow with an ESOL qualification and AUT gained by having trained ESOL staff able to offer a new and valuable dimension to their discipline team.

Writing in an academic world

The attitudes of teaching staff at AUT reflect world-wide trends in teacher perceptions at tertiary institutions in their dissatisfaction with student writing (AUT Report on Staff Experience Survey, 1999; 2001). Writing skills are, however, rated as very important by faculty, indicating that issues of student writing need to be addressed both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Writing workshops for staff are offered by CEPD to help teachers take responsibility for promoting student development in academic writing skills (Parker, 1997). Staff are encouraged to see themselves as models of the discipline discourse and their own written English as a key factor: written comments on student work need to be legible and comprehensible, exam and assignment questions need to be precise and unambiguous, and student handbooks need to clarify rather than obfuscate issues. In addition, course regulations need to be in plain English so that students can and will read them.

If discipline experts do not feel confident about their own language ability, they can consult a language specialist through the Helpline facility. In recent years student handbooks, university-wide surveys and student evaluation of teaching forms have all been adapted to make them more accessible to a wider audience.

Developments at programme level

Many certificate programmes now take responsibility for inducting the students into academic ways of thinking and writing. Others invite experts in learning support to deliver sessions on their programmes. Some Schools have developed modules in consultation with the School of Languages to reflect expert knowledge in the teaching of EAL students. In some cases these are delivered by both discipline and language experts working collaboratively. In others, the discipline expert may have an ESOL background which enables him/ her to fulfil both roles. Consistent support throughout a student's university study is seen as crucial to undergraduate development and later postgraduate success.

The ALIC policy requires all new programme proposals to include learning outcomes that address students' academic literacy needs and develop their intercultural competence. This requirement has enabled curriculum change to take place in the early stages of programme development.

There are still many issues to be addressed. One area destined to grow in the future is the role of academic staff appointed from outside the anglophone world. They themselves may need assistance in the form of cultural induction, teaching style and pronunciation support. But they also provide a rich resource and a bridge to understanding students who share the same culture, and the university needs to acknowledge and utilise the expertise they bring with them.

Policy Implementation Action Group

A Policy Implementation Action Group with university-wide representation now meets regularly and reports to Academic Board. The group aims to promote the development of academic literacies in English by disseminating examples of good practice and exploring issues in language and culture learning across the university. Recently the group identified some important aspects:

If EAL students are in the majority in a class, various problems can develop. For example, international students do not get the exposure to English language that they expect as part of their overseas learning experience (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997). In addition, group interactions can develop along ethnic lines with the result that international students, in particular, can feel dissatisfied with the lack of interaction with locals at their chosen place of study (Little, 2001).

If content staff are aware of how to support academic literacy needs, they are in a stronger position to assist students throughout a programme, be it at undergraduate or postgraduate level. In particular, content teachers at all levels could benefit from guidelines on the development of second language writing and how to assess it.

Most content teachers are aware that they need to make it clear to students when their language is below standard, and some programmes ensure that support is available both within and outside the programme (Little, 2001).

Models of curriculum and assessment issues for intercultural capabilities need to be explored so that guidelines can be drawn up for staff to implement these aspects of the policy.

Both students and employers would benefit from an assessment of students' language skills which could be available in a language profile on exit. Employers would have a clearer picture of the applicants' abilities and the skills of bilingual and multilingual speakers would be appropriately acknowledged.

Models from other universities indicate that significant changes in institutional practice can be achieved as an outcome of collaborative research into academic literacy development between discipline expert and language specialist (Emerson, 2000).

The ALIC Policy has helped focus attention on specific language needs and raised staff awareness of existing student support services. It has also raised many questions yet to be answered and highlighted issues that require time and planning – the implications of internationalising the curriculum, the complex cultural issues that arise in group work and the learning needs of first language English speakers in a linguistically diverse group of learners in an English medium university. As a university-wide group, the ALIC Implementation Action Group provides a forum for interdisciplinary discussion, which in turn should lead to a more informed and coherent approach.

Underpinning the ALIC Policy is the belief that language and cultural issues are a university-wide responsibility. The policy sets structures in place so that staff, students and curriculum developers have support in adapting to the changing demographics of tertiary students. The policy is inclusive in that it aims to support all students: local and international, first language speakers of English as well EAL students.

Many aspects of academic literacies that have come under the spotlight have been triggered by the immediate needs of international students. Their numbers are likely to increase and their needs must be met, not least because they are paying high fees for the services we offer (Paltridge, 2002). Their relatively sudden arrival in large numbers has highlighted the need for consistent and clear practices throughout the university and ultimately for policy development. Internationalisation, although market-driven in its concern with a global approach, has acted as a catalyst for addressing some of the issues which pertain to under-represented social groups in particular (Scott, 1998). Indeed, all students will benefit from tertiary institutions closing the gap between institutional expectations and student understandings.

The ALIC policy has had far-reaching, positive effects. It benefits all students in aiming to support and promote academic literacies generally, thereby averting the tension, in policy terms, between “the massification of [higher education], which has tended to focus on domestic democratic agendas, and internationalisation, which can be seen as giving priority to alien and elite agendas” (Scott, 1998, p.125).

The policy has provided AUT with a framework for developing a broad and comprehensive understanding of the literacy and cultural issues for staff and students and the university as a whole.

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