

FRAMING WRITING TASKS IN THE EAP CONTEXT: STRATEGIES FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Discipline-specific courses at tertiary level tend to operate within the framework of the dominant academic and cultural environment. Consequently, EAP students from non-English speaking backgrounds face the challenge of learning new academic literacies and skills, and are also often disadvantaged by their lack of knowledge and experience of the dominant New Zealand culture. This paper illustrates these issues with a critique of two extracts from degree level assessments, which arise from an investigation of discipline-specific assessments. The paper argues that EAP provides an important opportunity to encourage the expression of students' own cultural knowledge. It outlines an approach to writing tasks that allows students to express their own cultural knowledge and experience. At the same time these tasks support the development of relevant English academic literacies.

Introduction

Discipline-specific courses at tertiary level tend to be framed by the dominant cultural and academic context in which they operate. Non-English speaking background (NESB) students are therefore often at a disadvantage because of their lack of experience and knowledge of the culture of New Zealand. They also have the additional challenge of understanding, learning and adapting to a new and additional set of academic literacies. Course content and related assessment materials are in some cases so "highly culture-specific, often gratuitously so" (Mason, 1998, p45) that they appear to close the cultural door on NESB and non-local background students. This effectively silences them in terms of their own cultural knowledge, and denies them equal access in terms of learning and achievement. The trend towards globalisation of education and internationalisation of the student body is likely to make it increasingly important to address these issues.

We argue that tertiary level English for Academic Purposes [EAP] courses are well positioned to help redress some of these imbalances. We suggest that EAP assessments should not only support students in learning relevant English academic literacies, but should also ensure that students are able to express their own cultural knowledge and experience, wherever possible. We acknowledge that although the focus here is on NESB students, these issues are equally relevant for domestic students from minority groups, whose language and or cultural backgrounds are not framed by the dominant culture.

The paper focuses on writing assessments for two reasons. Firstly, assessment reflects learning priorities and the content of assessment reflects course content. Assessment is:

“...at the heart of the undergraduate experience. Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time, and how they come to see themselves as students and as graduates. It follows then that it is not the curriculum which shapes assessment, but assessment which shapes the curriculum...” (Brown and Knight, 1994, p.12).

Secondly, as Weigle argues, expertise in academic writing is seen as “an indication that students have mastered the cognitive skills required for university work” (2002, p.5).

The following section of the paper indicates the significance of globalisation of education and internationalisation of the student body for the issues we raise in terms of culture specificity, and for the role of EAP type courses. The next section outlines the research method. This is followed by a critique of two extracts from discipline-specific assessments, which illustrate the issues of culture specificity. The paper then summarises a set of principles for culturally responsive writing assessment in EAP. It finally illustrates this approach with examples of writing assessments from three different EAP courses.

The context: global education and internationalisation of the student body

Issues related to students’ cultural knowledge and experience, and teachers’ assumptions about these become increasingly significant with the continuing development of the global education ‘marketplace’ and the internationalisation of the student body. The number of online courses is likely to grow, thus increasing the potential access to New Zealand based courses of a global student body. (At Auckland University of Technology, for example, there are now over 700 courses available either online or with online components.) In addition, the growth in the numbers of foreign-fee paying (FFP) students studying at tertiary level in New Zealand has been generally strong over recent years. From 1994 to 2000 there was an increase of 191%, from 3,945 in 1994 to 11,498 in 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2003). According to the Ministry of Education, in 2000 only a total of 6.6% of these students came from English speaking countries, and the largest proportion at 79.1% came from Asian countries (ibid). Although there was a drop of approximately 50% in the number of Chinese student enrolments in particular in 2003, and a further drop in 2004, the overall trend is likely to lead to a growth in demand for EAP-type courses.

However, Butcher (2003, p.158) argues that tertiary education policy at national level in New Zealand has been “blind to cultural issues”, viewing international students as merely revenue generating commodities. The New Zealand context in particular is becoming increasingly culturally diverse. However, although there has been a significant indigenous revitalization here, which allows room for many minority cultures to become less marginalised, according to Bishop and Glynn (1999) the education systems continue to serve the cultural elite. Bishop and Glynn argue that attempts to address cultural diversity in New Zealand have been challenging because of “epistemological racism” (p.12) – a racism embedded in the fundamental principles of the dominant culture. The history of marginalisation in New Zealand extends to all cultures seen as ‘other’ by the culturally dominant group. However, “little is heard of the pedagogical assets brought by migrant

students and the benefits of majority culture students learning within culturally diverse classrooms” (Bishop and Glynn, 1999, p.15). The dominant culture is still the main reference point and Bishop and Glynn point out that power relations cannot change unless both parties participate, and then all parties can benefit – teachers, local students, and the international student body. To allow all parties to do this teachers must critically review their own practice, acknowledging that students’ cultural knowledge is acceptable and legitimate.

Research Method

The extracts from assessment that we focus on in the following section come from an ongoing study of discipline-specific undergraduate assessments in the Faculty of Arts at our own institution. Assessments analysed in our study are from first and second year papers on six major programmes in four Schools within the Faculty. The main purpose of this larger study is to identify and analyse the writing requirements in assessments on discipline-specific courses taken by students who are also taking the EAP paper. Content analysis of assessment instructions and marking criteria is used to identify the genres of writing tasks, as well as specific task requirements in terms of writing and cognitive skills. The results of the study so far have been used to inform revisions to course content on the EAP core degree paper in particular, in terms of the focus on academic genres and associated cognitive and writing skills. However, in the course of this study we identified two assessments in particular which we consider raise significant issues related to culture-specific content and the framing of assessment requirements in terms of a particular dominant academic discourse.

Discipline-specific courses: the dominant cultural and academic framework

This section discusses two extracts from undergraduate assessments at a New Zealand tertiary institution. The first illustrates the problems for NESB students of content that is culture-specific. Second-year students on a particular paper were required to analyse a set of images for visual meanings, and in terms of the relationships between text and visual content. The assessment criteria focused on the content and structure of the description and analysis, as well as on academic essay style and accuracy of language. A group of NESB international students had joined the programme at second year level and had been in New Zealand for only a few weeks at the time of this assessment. A number of these students brought the assessment to their EAP individual writing tutorials for assistance with understanding and analysis of the content.

All the images related to aspects of New Zealand culture, but the cultural and linguistic references of one of these were particularly problematic for these students (see Figure 1).

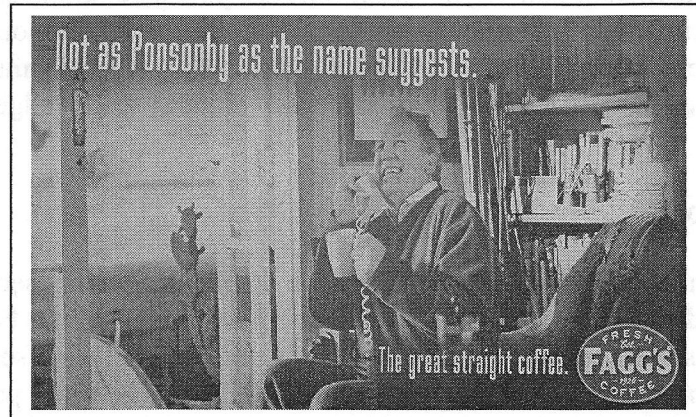


Figure 1. Billboard graphic: example of highly specific cultural and linguistic references

For non-local background students, the cultural references imbedded in this billboard advertising image and in the text are obscure in a number of ways. Who, what or where is Ponsonby? Why is it being used as an adjective? What are the double meanings associated with 'straight' and 'faggs'? Is there any significance in the image of the male figure? Even if students are able to manoeuvre their way through this linguistic and culture-laden minefield, there is the additional cultural issue of whether students would feel able, in their own cultural terms, to respond to an invitation to critique their host culture, which apparently finds it acceptable to openly target a sexual minority group in its advertising billboards.

At the same time, these students were writing their first assessed university-level academic essays in English. This not only involved reading subject-specific texts and mastering new vocabulary. For these students there were new academic literacies to learn - paraphrasing and summarising source materials, learning citation and referencing techniques, and learning to construct an explicit and coherent academic argument in English - as well as improving the language skills involved in expressing meaning with clarity and accuracy.

Staff in the relevant programme responded to the students' difficulties and to our own representations on the students' behalf. They took considerable steps to support the international students with this assessment, including providing special tutorials and a glossary of terms. However, students were clearly at a disadvantage in terms particularly of their lack of local cultural knowledge (see Mackinnon & Manathunga, 2003) as well as the demands of the new academic environment. The EAP staff suggested that international students might be allowed to analyse alternative images. However, it is understood that the staff in the School concerned continue to debate the dilemma between the desire to enable local students to analyse and critique aspects of the New Zealand culture, and the problems of equity of standards they consider to be posed by allowing alternative images for non-local students.

It can be argued that an assessment that requires students to analyse an image so embedded in New Zealand culture does not value these students' "background knowledge, culture and life experiences" (Bartolomé, 2003, p.425). Nor does it constitute a humanizing or

rewarding learning experience for students (ibid) - one of the students concerned failed the assessment and the others “just passed”. The assessment does appear, however, to offer opportunities to address culture-specificity, by globalizing content (Mason, 1998) – billboards and advertising are after all international phenomena. It would appear possible here to re-engineer “the educational paradigm to include people from many countries, studying materials designed for a multi-cultural audience” (ibid, p.45), where “all participants have an equal status and an equal contribution to make” (ibid, p.155). The inclusion of alternative or student-sourced images would also meet the suggestion of Bishop and Glynn (1999) that assessment practices should employ a range of culturally appropriate and culturally constructed strategies, so that understandings are related to the experiences of all learners. Finally, it would also provide for the choice and flexibility advocated by MacKinnon and Manathunga (2003) in their argument for “socially and culturally responsive assessment” (ibid, p.132).

Our second example illustrates the ways that dominant academic literacies and discourse can disadvantage NESB and minority culture students in particular. This second year assessment centred on the design of an apartment. In one stage of the project students were required to submit a three-dimensional “mapping device”, and a narrative (see below) supported by a 600 word essay. Key words listed for this stage included “polymorphous perversities”. Marking criteria were that “successful mapping devices will also evoke a poetic resonance with your narrative, through an intensive and carefully collected assemblage of data, equipment and materiality”. Students were asked to:

...construct a narrative/script ...(which) should focus on the collection of metaphoric or suggestive observations, data experiences rather than literal analogies or obvious clichés. It should be evocative of less obvious, evisceral in-between associations, and particularities such associations with the everyday evoke which allow you to bring forth a poetic interpretation of how your clients might live.

NESB students taking this assessment had considerable difficulties in un-packing the meaning of the instructions and marking criteria. We argue that there can be little justification for ‘packing-up’ assessment instructions and criteria in linguistic obscurantism that discriminates against NESB students in particular. These assessment details, reflecting a particular Euro-centric paradigm, are we suggest an example of what MacKinnon and Manathunga (2003, p.132) refer to as assessment based on “a Western template of knowledge that only values Western ways of knowing and learning...(and which) institutionalises discrimination against students from non-dominant backgrounds...”.

Although in the case of the second assessment students were reluctant for EAP lecturers to raise these issues with the discipline-specific staff concerned, generally it is possible for EAP staff to advocate for culturally responsive assessment tasks. We may not be effective in changing the nature of assignments set by lecturers in other schools, but we are able to prepare students to cope more adequately with the cultural dimension through our own approach to assessment tasks.

Approaches to writing-assessment tasks in EAP

EAP courses are particularly well-placed to develop strategies for assessments which allow students to voice their cultural knowledge and experience (are culturally responsive).

Our approach to culturally responsive and discipline-related writing assessment is based on a number of principles. We outline the most relevant of these as a framework for more specific strategies that follow.

- We argue that it is important to acknowledge that tertiary level NESB students have already acquired academic literacies and writing skills in their first languages, which are framed by their own cultures (see Canagarajah, 2001; Jordan, 1997). This acknowledgement avoids any perceptions that NESB students “have deficiencies that need remedial action” (Bishop and Glynn, 1999, p.15).
- As Jordan asserts, tasks and assessments should be structured “so as to enable learners to show what they DO know rather than what they DO NOT.”(1997, p.110)
- There is an obligation to introduce students to *relevant academic genres, literacies and “dominant communicative norms”* in order that their writing is seen as relevant and coherent, and reaches and retains its intended audience (Canagarajah, 2001, p.129). For example, because of differences in cultural approaches to the rhetorical structuring of texts, students may have to learn to adapt to different ways of organising texts and to different expectations in terms of writer-responsibility and explicitness. This implies the need for teachers to explore students’ knowledge of discipline specific conventions thus aiding the expansion of knowledge for both teacher and students (Jordan, 1997).
- Writing tasks should be ‘*authentic*’. That is tasks should reflect the type of writing that students will need in the academic world outside the EAP classroom (see Weigle, 2002). For example, because most academic writing involves source materials student writing should relate to text-based content. In other words EAP writing tasks should be “text-responsible” (Leki & Carson, 1997). Students should be responsible for showing their understanding of, as well as their ability to integrate and cite information from source texts – whether in spoken, written, or visual form. In addition, as most academic writing is not timed, the majority of EAP assessments should not be timed. This also allows students access to a range of resources and to edit and revise written drafts, as they would be able to do with the majority of discipline-specific assignments (Weigle, 2002; De Vita, 2002).
- Assessment content should also where possible be *discipline-relevant*. Writing assessments should if possible relate to areas of discipline-specific content, for example where EAP courses are concurrent with discipline-specific papers.
- Finally, *marking criteria should be explicit and clear*, so that students understand requirements and the way assessments will be marked.

The examples that follow illustrate strategies for constructing culturally responsive and, where relevant, discipline-related writing assessment on three EAP-type courses.

Needs and knowledge assessment in Introduction to English for Academic Study

Introduction to English for Academic Study (IEAS) is a one-semester pre-sessional certificate course. The students who enrol in this course plan to continue in mainstream study, but typically on certificate level courses. The IEAS students tend to be international students who have been in New Zealand a relatively short time.

A diagnostic exercise done at the start of IEAS requires students to identify themselves by nationality and or ethnicity, note down areas of previous study and interest, identify self-perceived strengths and weaknesses, and outline future study possibilities. This allows the lecturer to gather information on the cultural mix in the classroom, previous academic experience and knowledge of English academic literacies, as well as discipline areas of interest.

The results allow the lecturer to alter class dynamics to facilitate cultural exchanges and comparisons between students, while at the same time introducing the local New Zealand cultural and academic context. The aim is to empower the students, as this approach gives attention to individual cultural experiences, thus validating them. It allows students to position themselves within local New Zealand culture by examining the similarities and differences between New Zealand culture and their own. Rather than presenting local academic 'norms' as 'correct', and thereby adding power to the already dominant culture in the local setting, students' own knowledge and experiences are acknowledged and become integrated with newer knowledge about the New Zealand context. Students add to what they DO know with what they DO NOT know, rather than having what they DO know dismissed as 'incorrect'.

Subsequent course writing tasks and assessments attempt to incorporate student experiences and cultural knowledge. Writing tasks in assessment one (paragraph writing task) allow the expression of cultural experiences and knowledge with topics such as, "Learning another language", "Coming to New Zealand to study", and "Living in a New Zealand homestay". This is continued in assessment three (essay writing task) with topics including "Learning about different cultures", "Living and studying in a new country", "Compare the education system in your own country with that in New Zealand", and 'Discuss the importance of the internet for overseas students in New Zealand'. At the same time text-responsible writing exercises are given to extend students' knowledge and experience of the New Zealand academic and cultural context.

Formative assessment in English for Academic Study

Another of our courses for NESB students is a one-semester pre-sessional certificate paper called English for Academic Study (EAS). The students (both permanent resident and international) who enrol in this course plan to continue mainstream study, usually on completion of the certificate. Those who achieve an A or B pass overall may be accepted into degree or diploma programmes while others can usually be recommended for a certificate course. Some of the students have a firm idea of what they want to study while others make decisions during or at the end of the course. Currently, we offer a Business and General stream according to students' stated interests. The writing paper consists of five

hours of lectures per week, and students' work is evaluated by means of two in-class tests and an assignment (research paper).

It may be interesting to describe the first, formative writing exercise, which is a learning step on the way to Assessment One. In this exercise, students are required to write a paragraph outlining how a lack of language can cause difficulties for a migrant or an international student. Obviously, this is a subject that is familiar to everybody in EAS. To gather ideas for the task, the students discuss the topic in groups and then contribute ideas to the class. In addition, they attempt to classify the difficulties identified into types, a common academic exercise, which develops analytical thinking skills. As a result of this collaboration in terms of experiences and ideas, students have enough material to organise and write a short individual paragraph.

As far as formative assessment criteria are concerned, the students' writing is evaluated according to explicit marking criteria which reflect the main principles of an academic paragraph. These include the relevance of the content, a topic and concluding sentence, unity, coherence, order of importance, use of academic vocabulary, academic style, punctuation and spelling. Formative feedback consists of a report based on the above criteria, in which students are informed about areas where they may be experiencing difficulties. To sum up, a task such as this taps into students' existing knowledge and experience, focusing on what they DO know, at the same time as developing their ability to produce a well-organised and coherent paragraph, a fundamental element of academic writing.

Five progressive assessed writing tasks in English for Academic Purposes

Our final example is from a concurrent one-semester paper offered to undergraduate students on degree programmes in the Faculty of Arts. Students who take this paper are majoring in Japanese, Chinese, English, Social Science, Psychology or Communication Studies. Class contact consists of three hours of lectures per week as well as a total of three individual writing tutorials for each student. There are three assessments on this course, which parallels the BA assessment model.

An earlier form of the first assessment - an expository essay, submitted in week 5 of the course and worth 30% of total marks - has been replaced by five assessed writing tasks (see Table 1). These tasks allow for the incremental integration of relevant academic literacies and writing skills, as well as a degree of discipline-relevant choice. In addition there is a focus on writing process in that students are required to submit a first and final draft, both of which are assessed. The second draft is produced after written feedback and (where timing allows) discussion at writing tutorials. These tasks are spread between weeks five and nine of the course and help to prepare students for a 1,500 word extended text-responsible essay submitted in week 11.

Table 1 outlines the specific writing tasks which range from paragraph writing, through a short literature review to a 500 word essay. The inclusion of the latter reflects the requirement for short essay answers in some discipline-specific assessment questions. The table also indicates the choice of either culture or discipline-related topics. A number of these relate to culture because cultural issues have global applications and are also relevant in a variety of ways to the particular students who take this course. For example, in the

paragraph summaries of texts (Task Two), students majoring in Japanese can choose to summarise information relating to Japanese cultural values. Other students studying a paper on New Zealand law can summarise information from a text relating to a clash between the New Zealand legal system and cultural values. Additional topics are related to students' discipline areas. For example, students studying New Zealand literature can choose a text about the writing of Janet Frame. Finally, in Task Five, students are able to use their own cultural knowledge in an essay topic about exports from their own country. There is therefore an attempt to offer choice and either a global topic or discipline-relevance to the range of students on this paper.

Table 1: Assessment One: five assessed writing tasks (6% each)

Task One: 2 paragraphs from given notes <i>Choice of topics:</i> various
Task Two: 1 paragraph summary of specific information from given texts <i>Choice of topic:</i> culture-related and/or discipline-relevant choice
Task Three: short literature review based on 5 given quotations <i>Topic:</i> definitions of culture in different disciplines
Task Four: library search for specific texts & one paragraph summary <i>Topic:</i> culturally-significant architecture
Task Five: 500 word expository essay <i>Topic:</i> related to students' own country

Table 2 outlines the marking criteria for the assessed writing tasks. A maximum three marks are achievable for the first draft, and a further three marks for the second draft. Students are provided with a list of marking criteria for each task, as well as descriptors for achieving three, two or one mark(s) respectively for each draft. It can be seen that "task analysis and response to task instructions" are recurring criteria in all five assessments. Our experience is that even at postgraduate level some students fail to read and analyse assessment instructions carefully enough. By allowing students to make these mistakes at an early stage in the EAP course and lose relatively few marks (out of 3 for the first draft) we aim to assist students in developing these analytical skills. The tasks also assist students in developing literacies and skills such as paraphrasing, framing citations, using in-text references and so on in the context of limited tasks.

Table 2: Outline marking criteria for five assessed writing tasks

Task 1 [3%+3%]	Accuracy of: task analysis; response to instructions; pre-revelation of topic/theme; language use Logic of organisation; coherence and cohesion
Task 2	Accuracy of: task analysis; response to instructions; paraphrasing; framing of citation(s); in-text references; language use Notes submitted

[3%+3%]	Relevance of summarised information; coherence and cohesion
Task 3 [3%+3%]	Accuracy of: task analysis; response to instructions; pre-revelation of theme; framing of citations; in-text references; reference list; language use Logic of organization; cohesion and coherence of argument
Task 4 [3%+3%]	Accuracy of: task analysis; response to task instructions Listing of search words used; number of 'hits'; details of texts found Summary: structure; relevance; coherence and cohesion Accuracy of: paraphrasing; citation(s); in-text reference(s); language use
Task 5 [3%+3%]	Accuracy of: task analysis; response to instructions; essay structure; framing of citation(s); in-text references; reference list; language use Cohesion and coherence

Conclusion

Our students have responded well, so far, to the efforts we have made to make our approach a culturally responsive one. We have observed an increased level of engagement with EAP writing tasks, and at tutorials where some of these are discussed. In addition, student feedback on the courses in general is highly positive, with comments such as “excellent for second language learners”.

Our study of writing requirements in discipline-specific assessments, the results of which we plan to publish in a separate paper, was undertaken in order to inform the content of EAP courses. The aim was to identify required written genres as well as cognitive and writing skills in undergraduate courses undertaken by students who also take our EAP papers. It is interesting that in the course of this study we have identified an unexpected issue in terms of culturally biased assignment tasks. These findings have led to a move on our part from a tacit perception that EAP courses should be culturally inclusive, to a more explicit understanding of the role EAP courses can play. EAP can support students in the development of relevant English academic literacies and skills, in the context of a comparison with students' existing academic literacies. It can also develop these skills while referring to and utilising students' wider cultural knowledge and experience. In addition, EAP lecturers can play a role in highlighting the issues associated with culture-specific assessments in other programmes, and advocate on behalf of students with discipline-specific staff.

We hope that the issues we have discussed and the approach we have outlined may be of value to others involved in EAP course development. We would recommend that lecturers investigate the requirements of discipline-specific assessments, and develop their own strategies for integrating the teaching and learning of relevant genres, English academic literacies and skills, with topics that allow students to express their existing cultural knowledge and experience.

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