

A step towards putting the students back into the academic language support model

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A decrease in the level of communication skills of university graduates has been a rising concern of educators worldwide. Responses to these concerns have produced literature that focuses on the kinds of academic language support educators can provide while the role of students has been downplayed. Attempting to fill this gap, this paper describes a model that emphasises the active role of students in the academic language learning process. This paper describes how a discipline academic and a language expert designed an accounting information systems course with the aim of integrating academic language skills into the course to improve the academic literacy skills of students. Apart from describing the details of the integrated academic support, the paper provides useful suggestions to educators on how to provide similar types of support to their students effectively.

Key Words: Academic language and learning, integrated support, discipline academic, language expert.

1. Introduction

A decrease in the levels of written and spoken communication skills of university graduates has been a rising and persistent concern of educators worldwide, according to a report undertaken for the Carrick Institute (Jackson, Watty, Yu, & Lowe, 2006). This is despite the fact that researchers (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Birrell, 2006; Burch, 2008; Stupans, Rao, March, & Elliot, 2008; Watty, 2007) find that the most important skills required of university graduates, regardless of their discipline, are communication skills. Many studies, however, show that a significant number of students still have poor levels of communication skills even after three to four years of university education (Birrell, 2006; Jackling, 2007; Watty, 2007). Without the requisite communication skills, university graduates will often struggle in their search for jobs (Hancock et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2006).

To address the issue of poor levels of communication skills amongst university graduates, much extant research has been focused primarily on exploring what kind of resources are provided by universities and what other steps universities can take (Briguglio & Watson, 2014). It is common for universities to provide self-help materials or language and literacy workshops (generic or discipline-specific) to students (Wingate, 2006). More recent research focuses on the role of language experts (LEs) and how LEs can work with discipline academics (DAs) to provide

seamless support to students (Chanock, 2013; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Jones, Bonanno, & Scouller, 2001).

We believe that it is too optimistic for universities to assume that provision of more support resources will automatically solve the communication skills problem. There is no evidence in the literature that students who are most in need make use of support resources. Students in need very often are already experiencing an overload academically and hence they are the least likely to take advantage of much-needed support. Hence, we believe it is vital to engage students in their academic learning within their discipline.

A review of the education literature shows that student engagement is not a new idea. There are many examples of student-centred learning or teacher-student partnerships (Healey, O'Connor, & Broadfoot, 2010; Jensen & Bennett, 2016). However, these examples are primarily in discipline learning. Examples of active student engagement in academic learning are rare. We agree with some researchers that without the active engagement of students, improvement in students' academic literacy is unlikely (Thies, 2012). To fill in the gap on the lack of emphasis on students in the academic language support process, we propose a model that brings the role played by students in the process to the forefront. In this paper, we describe a case study where a small class of postgraduate accounting students in Australia took on an active role in the academic language support model. We examine how much students made use of the support provided to them. The academic performance of students in the course and their comments on the learning experience suggest that helping students to take responsibility for their learning is a good way to improve university students' communication skills. The reported experience in this paper is useful to educators who are interested in enhancing the language capabilities of their students.

2. Role of students in the learning process

There has been an ongoing discussion in the education literature on how to improve the teaching and learning experience of students. Many argue that teaching in the higher education should be shifted from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning (Biggs, 1999; Jensen & Bennett, 2016; Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Some even treat students as producers instead of purely consumers of knowledge (Neary, 2010). Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, and Moore-Cherry (2016) view students as co-creators of their learning and identified four roles of students in the learning process: co-researcher, consultant, representative, and pedagogical co-designer. In these different roles, students are actively engaged and became partners with their teachers.

The idea of engaging students as an active partner in the learning process is not new (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). For example, Jensen and Bennett (2016) report a successful student and staff partnership model in the U.K. As a partnership involves a reciprocal relationship between students and academic staff (Healey et al., 2014), one can argue that a complete partnership is unlikely to be supported or approved by university management. However, this should not stop the development of some form of staff-student partnership.

Healey et al. (2010) classify three levels of student engagement. At the bottom level, micro student engagement means that students are engaged in the learning process of their own and the classmates. This is the most common type of student engagement found in the literature. At the middle level, meso student engagement means that students help to maintain the quality assurance and enhancement of curriculum. An example of meso student engagement involved a student-staff partnership program in Canada where 13 undergraduates helped the university to design an online course (Marquis et al., 2016). At the top level, macro student engagement means that students are consulted in the strategic development. Unsurprisingly, this is the least common form of student engagement (Healey et al., 2010).

While active engagement of students is common in the literature, interestingly, most studies are about discipline learning. Discussion of student engagement in the academic learning process is limited. Among those limited studies on academic learning that mention students (Einfalt & Turley, 2009a, 2009b, 2013; Kokkinn & Mahar, 2011), students tend to take on just a passive role because the descriptions in those studies focus on what discipline academics and other supporting academic can provide to students and how they can “expose all students to literacy support” (Einfalt & Turley, 2009a, p. A109). In a three-way collaborative model proposed by Einfalt and Turley (2009a, 2013), students were used as the focus for the communication among the DA, the LE, and the librarian, but the role of the students in the learning process was primarily passive. Kokkinn and Mahar (2011) report positive results based on Einfalt and Turley’s model at the University of South Australia. In the following section, we will provide a detailed discussion of the literature on academic language support to show that the role of students has largely been overlooked.

3. Academic language support in higher education

Academic learning is about enhancing students’ academic and information literacy (Einfalt & Turley, 2009a). The existing literature on academic learning support is biased toward educators over students. There are many studies that examine the issue from the educators’ perspective. We classify such studies into four groups: support mechanisms, the role of LEs, the relationship between LEs and DAs, and the role of students.

3.1. Support mechanisms

The first group of studies focuses on what kind of support universities have provided or should provide to their students. Typically, universities provide support such as self-help resources, generic writing workshops, and discipline-specific tutorials. Some educators believe that face-to-face teaching is the most effective approach (Chanock, 2013), while others adopt new technologies to support the students (Beaumont, 2011; Müller, Arbon, & Gregoric, 2015). For example, Beaumont (2011) describes how academic language and learning staff offer electronic just-in-time sessions and embed these in the learning management system (LMS).

Fenton-Smith and Humphreys (2015) list nine types of support mechanism typically provided to university students. Examples of these support mechanisms include English language diagnostic tests designed to gather information about students (Harper, 2013), generic skills workshops, adjunct language tutorial, and team teaching between DA and LEs (Harris & Ashton, 2011). Research has shown that students benefit more and perform better when support is integrated into their specific disciplines instead of in the form of bolt-on workshop approaches (Evans, Tindale, Cable, & Mead, 2009; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Lea & Street, 2006; May & May, 1989; Wingate, 2006; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Briguglio and Watson (2014) also describe various types of support provided to students in *an embedded language development and support continuum*. They propose that while maximum embedment and support are ideal, it is important for universities to provide a full array of facilities along the continuum to students.

In the process of providing academic language support, there is a constant debate on whether it is better to have a top-down or bottom-up approach. Some researchers believe that the top-down whole-of-institution approach is the ideal approach because it is more cost-effective and is sustainable (Harper, 2013; Harris, 2016; Thies, 2012). Evans et al. (2009) describe a well-funded and planned approach to integrating language skills into a master degree program in an Australian university. However, others support the bottom-up approach because the top-down approach is more likely to encounter resistance from staff (Chanock, 2013; Thies, 2012), and as Muller et al. (2015) point out, it makes sense to try new ideas on a small scale at the school or faculty level first. It appears that most successful cases in the literature are bottom-up projects initiated by LEs (Harris & Ashton, 2011).

3.2. The role of language experts

The second group of studies discusses the value and role of LEs (Briguglio, 2007, 2009; Jones et al., 2001). For example, self-reflection of the role of LE in students' learning process can be found in Briguglio (2007) and Wilson (2005). Successful bottom-up projects initiated by LEs can be found in Harris and Ashton (2011). In most cases, researchers believe that LEs and DAs can complement each other (Beaumont, 2011; Brooman-Jones, Cunningham, Hanna, & Wilson, 2011; Chanock, 2013; Elton, 2010; Wilson, 2005). Chanock (2013) describes in details the collaboration process, from initial meetings between DAs and LEs to final evaluation of the project. In the process, LEs acted as the "middleman" and forwarded students' comments and difficulties to DAs who would then use the information to make changes accordingly.

Other studies in this group examine the reason behind the little collaboration between DAs and LEs. Wingate (2006) explains that DAs are not keen to work with LEs to provide academic language support because they want to focus on the content of a course, or they simply do not want to increase their workload. Other possible explanations are that DAs do not have the skills, experience, or the time to provide individual support to their students (Benzie, 2010; McIsaac & Sepe, 1996).

In the process of providing language support to students, the responsibility for the design and delivery of the support is taken typically by the LEs while the DAs take a relatively minor role (May & May, 1989). Researchers have called for a shift from bolt-on workshops provided by LEs to an integrated support via collaboration between DAs and LEs (Lea & Street, 2006; Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

3.3. Relationship between language experts and discipline academics

The third group of studies examines the relationship between LEs and DAs in the collaboration process. It describes various forms and degrees of collaboration between these two groups.

Dudley-Evans (2001) classifies the relationship between DAs and LEs into three levels: cooperation, collaboration, and team teaching. The higher the level, the closer the DAs and LEs work together. Brooman-Jones et al. (2011) extend Dudley-Evans' (2001) classification to include integrated assessment. Building on Dudley-Evans (2001), Jones et al. (2001) provide more specific context information on how DA and LE work together and describe the relationship between the two groups on a continuum. Points on this continuum include:

- Adjunct (context specific – weak)
- Adjunct (context specific – strong)
- Integrated
- Embedded

These four approaches represent different degrees of collaboration and differ on who directly provides the support to students. Harris and Ashton (2011) extend Jones et al. (2001) and add a fifth level – embedded and integrated. They demonstrate how they have achieved the top level of collaboration with specific examples from an MBA degree. Examples of team teaching and collaboration between LEs and DAs can be found in different disciplines such as architecture (Baik & Greig, 2009) and accounting (Evans et al., 2009; May & Arevalo, 1983). However, the focus of these approaches (Brooman-Jones et al., 2011; Dudley-Evans, 2001; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Jones et al., 2001) is primarily on the interventions undertaken by the educators, rather than a focus on the students' participation.

3.4. The role of students

Few studies in the literature emphasise the role of students outside discipline learning. Among these limited studies that examine the issue of academic language support from the students' perspective, some studies highlight the importance of communication skills for students and graduates while others examine why the level of communication skills of students is falling. However, despite the numerous studies on micro student engagement in discipline learning, few studies discuss or promote student engagement in academic learning. The focus of most studies on academic learning remains on how DAs and LEs work together to provide customised, suitable support to students, who are treated as passive consumers, waiting to be served. Even in the case of Einfalt and Turley (2009a, 2009b) and Kokkinn and Mahar (2011) where students are mentioned explicitly in a three-way collaborative model for academic language support, the emphasis is on the educators, not students, taking responsibility for students' academic learning. In the following section, we outline our case study which attempts to encourage students to take on a more active role in their academic learning.

4. Background information on the case study

4.1. The course

Among the studies that examine how to improve the communication skills of students in universities, only limited studies have looked at accounting students (Brooman-Jones et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2009; May & Arevalo, 1983; May & May, 1989; McIsaac & Sepe, 1996). The course described in the case study was offered by the School of Accounting in the Business Faculty of a large Australian university once a year. Many prior studies on accounting education examine introductory financial accounting courses for undergraduate students (Hilton & Phillips, 2010; Palm & Bisman, 2010; Warren & Young, 2012). For example, Hilton and Phillips (2010) examine whether the method of forming groups has any impact on the learning experience of introductory financial accounting students.

To provide a slightly different context, this case study focuses on students' learning processes in a postgraduate course in the accounting information systems area. The class format of the course is a three-hour weekly seminar that runs for 13 weeks including a one-week break. The course is compulsory for students enrolling in a two-year Master of Advanced Accounting degree.

The course covers the information technology (IT) knowledge and competency requirements for accountants as specified in the International Education Practice Statement (IEPS) 2. Students also learn to conduct research to assess the impacts of emerging IT issues on the accounting profession. Issued by the International Accounting Education Standards Board (IAESB), IEPS 2 describes different types of IT knowledge and competencies that accounting professionals are expected to have (IAESB, 2007).

Apart from IT knowledge, the course focuses on academic writing. The assessment scheme comprises three sets of discussion questions (worth 30%), a research proposal (worth 10%) and a final research report of 4,000 words (worth 60%). All are individual assessments. The discussion questions require students to explore different IT topics such as IT governance/control and extensible business reporting language (XBRL). These discussions also provide opportunities for students to receive feedback from their lecturer on their writing skills throughout the semester. Similarly, the research proposal provides students with the opportunity to receive formative feedback on their work before completing the final research report. The research assignment requires students to be competent at researching, referencing, paraphrasing, critiquing literature, writing a literature review, analysing data, and using appropriate academic language to prepare academic reports.

4.2. The students

The case study took place over two years of a postgraduate accounting course. The majority of each cohort spoke English as an additional language and were full-time students. The numbers of students enrolled in the course were 13 and 6 respectively. The major obstacle perceived by educators was that students did not acknowledge any room for improvement in their English language skills or understand the importance of continuing to develop their language skills during their university study (Lucas, 2000). From the authors' personal experience, many students believe that they have attained the required English language and communication levels for the accounting discipline. As a result, students were often surprised when their assignments failed to meet their lecturer's expectations.

4.3. The educators

The DA of the course has more than 10 years of experience teaching at three major Australian universities and a European university. Her first experience teaching this particular class before the case study was sobering. She realised that academic support would be required for future delivery of the class if students were to have a chance of doing well in the course. Feedback from teaching evaluations also indicated students wanted more guidance and support in preparing their assignments, as evidenced by the following:

‘Since there is a research paper to be done, a research lesson should be included to teach us how to do a research paper.’

Hence the DA sought help from a faculty-based division, the Communication Skills Centre (CSC). The CSC is a language and academic support centre provided at the faculty level. It offers language and academic literacy support to students in the business school (Briguglio, 2009). The CSC aims to help students in four key areas; academic writing, interpersonal communication, professional communication, and study skills. Traditionally, support has been offered through generic bolt-on workshops and academic skills and language classes. However, in recent years, the CSC has started to integrate language and academic literacy skills into individual courses and degree programs to target students' specific needs. The LE involved in the case study has more than 10 years of experience providing language support to university students. She had worked in integrated support settings in the business faculty but did not have experience providing integrated support to accounting students prior to the case study.

5. Integrated academic language support model

In this section, we describe in detail an integrated academic language support model (Figure 1) that puts students at the forefront of the learning process. In the model, all students, regardless of their primary language or academic capability, no longer take a backseat but take on an active role side by side with the DA and LE in the learning process. The model is designed to be implemented at the individual course level. Reaching out to students in specific courses not only ensures all students have an equal opportunity to enhance their academic literacy, but also enhances the chance of helping students who might otherwise ‘fall through the cracks.’ Furthermore, teaching academic literacies in the context of the students' discipline area is more likely to enhance students' motivation to improve as they can see the relevance of what they are learning (Lea & Street, 2006; Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

The idea of the model originated from prior work on academic language support, in particular, Jones et al. (2001) and Einfalt and Turley (2013). It is worthwhile noting that while some researchers use the terms ‘embedded’ and ‘integrated’ interchangeably, others interpret them differently (Harris & Ashton, 2011; Jones et al., 2001). In this study we use the term ‘integrated’ because it implies “bringing together (parts) into a whole” and “to combine into one unified system” (Delbridge, 1981, p. 920). This term also fits with our image of a jigsaw puzzle and the idea of working towards fitting all pieces together.

In a typical university setting, students seek course-related support from their course coordinators or tutors either during class or at specified consultation times. If students wish to seek academic language support, they generally go to a designated area such as the CSC. The focus of discussion in the literature on academic language support has always been on the teachers – DAs or LEs. What we did differently was emphasising the role of students and the collaboration among three groups of stakeholders, namely the students, the DAs and the LEs. Figure 1 below shows three groups of stakeholders in the integrated academic support process. A fully integrated language support model includes collaboration and interaction among all stakeholders. The collaboration and interaction are presented as seven zones in the diagram and are described in detail in the following sections.

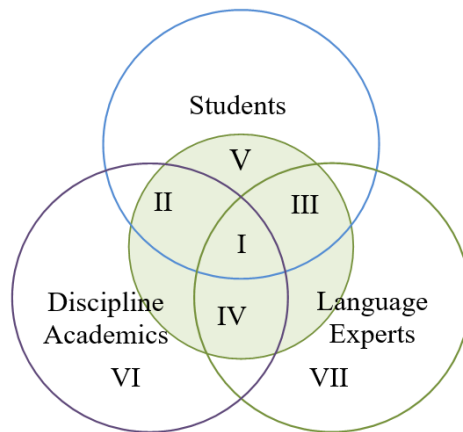


Figure 1. Integrated Academic Support Model.

5.1. Zone I: Collaboration among DAs, LEs, and students

This zone represents the interactions among the three groups of stakeholders where the DA and the LE team-taught in class time. In this case study, the LE was present for the first five classes. The first class was structured to provide ample time for students to become acquainted with one another, and for the DA and LE to get to know the students. Time was set aside for students to meet and talk to fellow classmates as well as the DA and LE. Research demonstrates that students are more likely to participate in class or seek assistance if they feel comfortable and secure in their learning environment (Einfalt & Turley, 2013; Entwistle & Peterson, 2004).

After the ice-breaker activities, students were asked to complete a 14-question multiple-choice grammar test. Then the LE and DA discussed the grammar issues in those questions with the class. This was the first language diagnostic task. Moreover, students were directed to answer three questions using complete sentences. The objective was twofold. First, the questions provided background information on individual students. Second, they reflected students' writing capabilities beyond the simple multiple-choice format. These questions were:

- What do you expect to learn from this course?
- What is your IT background? How would you describe your IT knowledge?
- Do you have any work experience? If so, how long and in what areas?

The DA provided feedback on the questionnaire in the second seminar. She also made use of the opportunity to manage students' expectations of the course. Based on the written questionnaires, the LE provided individual written feedback to the students on four aspects: task fulfilment; grammar and vocabulary; organisation, coherence, and cohesion; and punctuation and spelling. These criteria were explained to students in jargon-free language and individual feedback highlighted language areas that students could usefully work on to improve their writing and ultimately the quality of their future assignments. The goal of providing the feedback was to help students gain

a realistic understanding of their writing skills. Moreover, revision of these language elements throughout subsequent classes provided cohesion to the language intervention.

Apart from lectures and discussions on IT-specific topics, classes included other language-related learning activities. Based on a former student's short extract of written work on password security, students worked in small groups and discussed how they could improve the writing in the extract in terms of grammar, vocabulary, organisation, spelling, and punctuation. These aspects of writing corresponded to the individual written feedback provided by the LE earlier. The objective of hands-on critique of the work of others was to inspire students to realise they could do the work required of them and achieve a good grade. After the group discussions, students reported the results back to the class. All language-based activities in the class were aimed at providing opportunities to help students improve their academic writing capabilities through the use of discipline-specific materials such as articles and past assignments on Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) in inventory management, enterprise resources planning (ERP) systems, and extensible business reporting language (XBRL). Moreover, the materials used in the activities gave a clear signal to the students regarding the expectations of the quality of assignments in the course.

The LE facilitated class sessions on several topics: academic integrity, referencing and avoiding plagiarism, writing a research proposal, and writing a research report. She also demonstrated how to search academic databases efficiently. Students were given time to search the literature on topics they were interested in. Using the search results, students had opportunities to apply the referencing style they had learned. The LE facilitated a session on paraphrasing as well as when and how to use direct quotations. To clarify what is regarded as plagiarism and what is not, we used anonymous assignments on relevant IT topics from the previous semester for discussion. Students discussed and assessed several research proposals and a final report according to marking rubrics. The groups then reported their findings.

Both the DA and the LE spent much time with students to help them develop appropriate research questions for their research project assignments. While students were encouraged to discuss their research questions with fellow classmates, the DA and LE provided individual assistance as well. Afterwards, students' research questions were written on the board to initiate peer-based discussion. Such in-class activities helped ensure students developed appropriate research questions early in the semester, with the flow-on effect that they had ample time to devote to the research, analysis and writing up phases.

5.2. Zone II: Collaboration between DAs and students

In a university setting, students' interactions with DAs in any course take place in a variety of ways in and outside the classroom – lectures, tutorials, and scheduled consultation times. Apart from the contact hours in class, the DA in the case study provided four hours of after-class consultation every week. Students who could not come during the consultation time could make appointments to see the DA at other times.

With the aim of helping students to make progress in their academic literacy throughout the semester, the DA provided detailed written feedback in each assessment. Students were encouraged to bring drafts of their assessments to the consultation sessions so they could discuss those comments with the DA in detail. She inquired about students' progress on the research project every week during the class and constantly encouraged students to work on improving their writing skills.

5.3. Zone III: Collaboration between LEs and students

Zone III represents the support students receive from a language support centre without the presence of a DA – language workshops and individual appointments with LEs. These consultations usually relate to the academic literacies required for student assignments.

Having the LE take part in the class helped students feel comfortable about seeking assistance from the LE and hence motivated students seek help from the CSC. Attendance records kept by the CSC show that more students took advantage of individual consultations offered by the CSC staff over the two-year period. In the first year, approximately one-third of students made individual appointments to discuss their written work. The number increased to 100 percent in the second year. The average appointment time per student in the second year was one hour. During those one-on-one appointments, the LE focused on providing constructive feedback so that students could learn from their mistakes.

In the second round of the case study, four two-hour group sessions were set aside for students outside of class time. These sessions were peer-led, with students discussing their written work with their fellow classmates while the LE was available for assistance when necessary. Records showed that several students sought ongoing support from the CSC after the course was over.

5.4. Zone IV: Collaboration between DAs and LEs

The collaboration began with initial meetings between the DA and the LE on the nature of the course and how it fitted into the degree program. The planning involved devising a range of deliberate and structured integrated academic support activities. Involvement of the LE from the beginning helped to ensure she had sufficient time allocated to work through the planned activities.

The DA and LE built up trust and confidence in each other by communicating regularly and always completing agreed on tasks. The DA and LE were open to feedback and respected each other's cultural and ethnic backgrounds and working experience. They also provided moral support to each other as sometimes students' engagement did not happen according to plan. The close collaboration between the two provided a type of contingency plan. If one was unavailable, the other one could step in.

There were email exchanges, telephone conversations, and face-to-face discussions (formal and informal) between the DA and the LE on issues such as presentation slides and in-class activities. Regular communication allowed them to reflect on classes, and re-calibrate their expectations of students in light of new information received as the classes progressed. The DA and LE updated each other on the students' progress including common writing problems, the willingness of students to seek help from the CSC, and their progress and performance on assignments. Sometimes, the DA identified certain problematic grammar areas as a result of marking assignments, such as how to use parallel structures, and would request the LE to focus on problematic topics in class and during individual appointments with students. After the semester finished, the DA and the LE had face-to-face meetings to discuss and reflect on the course outcomes. We believe that the close collaboration and the level of familiarity and easiness between the DA and LE exhibited a role model of collegial behaviour we expected from the postgraduate students both inside and outside the classroom setting.

5.5. Zone V: Collaboration among students

A truly integrated support model includes not only dialogue and interaction between teachers and students but also among students themselves (Briguglio, 2011). In this course, students were encouraged to communicate in English both in and outside the classroom instead of interacting in their home language (Benzie, 2010). To help overcome students' reluctance to speak out in class, ice-breaker activities were planned in the first two classes. Students were encouraged to move around freely in the classroom to chat with fellow classmates and the teaching staff.

Research has shown that students often are more willing to discuss issues freely when they are in small groups and can 'find their feet' before being asked to voice their ideas in front of a class (Cohen, 1994). Hence, small group discussions were planned in every class. After the group discussions, students would take turns to present their results to the class and take up the role of

leading other students in discussions. This strategy provided students with a safe environment to practise their communication skills. Through consistent interactions in class, students not only developed a network but also formed a bond among themselves.

Apart from interactions in class, students had the opportunity to discuss their work outside the classroom. Several optional two-hour sessions were booked specifically for students so they could meet with fellow students and provide feedback on one another's assignments. Even though LE was available for consultation, it was the students who took the lead.

5.6. Zone VI: Collaboration among DAs

This type of support is not applicable in the case study because only one DA was responsible for the course. However, the DA had regular informal discussions on course design with another colleague who specialised in accounting information systems.

5.7. Zone VII: Collaboration among LEs

The LE and her colleagues – other LEs at the CSC – regularly communicated with one another regarding students in this course. They discussed common language problems and how best to support the students.

6. Outcomes and feedback

After each semester, the DA shared the teaching evaluation results, in particular, students' written comments, and the statistics of the performance of the students with the LE. Students' scores indicated that their written skills had improved. The average mark increased approximately 10 percent from 62.4 to 69.5 over the two-year period. Apart from the improved performance, the outcomes were positive as the proportion and frequency of students seeking assistance with their writing increased.

Written feedback from students' evaluations of teaching was positive, as evidenced by the following:

- 'The teaching in this course is up-to-date.'
- 'The lecture sessions were very interactive. Feedback on the assessments was detailed and very helpful to improve students' writing skills.'
- '[The teacher] is motivated, hardworking, ambitious, and knowledgeable.'
- '...The discussion questions help tie in with our weekly topics and the games hosted in the class towards the end of the semester was fun and made learning more interesting. The language skills lecturer that was brought in to class at the start of the semester was also a big help!'
- 'Feedback and support provided by the [DA and LE] were outstanding. The analogies provided allowed me to understand certain topics easier. Working in groups to answer questions – interesting activities in class was also helpful to my learning experiences.'
- 'The small assessments helped me to gain more knowledge about many things, such as computer security, XBRL, etc.'

However, there were also negative comments:

- 'Too much proportion for the assignment. Stress...'
- 'The small assessments should be worth higher than 10%.'
- 'The major assignment may be more suitable as a group assignment instead of an individual assignment.'

Apart from written feedback stated in the formal teaching evaluations, some students have provided positive oral feedback to the DA. Many liked the opportunities to lead discussions in the class as it was different from their somewhat more passive learning experience in other courses.

In particular, some found the peer-to-peer consultations useful and rewarding. These student-led consultation sessions helped students improve the quality of their reports and gain satisfaction from helping other fellow students.

Overall, students' comments covered three areas. First, students considered it important to have up-dated course content, especially for an information systems course. Second, students valued a learning experience that was both interesting and interactive. Third, in relation to academic language support, students appreciated the detailed comments provided by the DA and LE. The breakdown of assessments into smaller scaffolded pieces meant teachers could provide continuous feedback and students could make continuous improvements. However, the downside of continuous feedback from the teachers was that some students found the workload too heavy.

7. Continuous improvement

As a result of reflecting on the experience of academic language support in the first year the course was delivered, we decided to expand the number of interventions in the second year. We felt students had gained from the support in and outside the classroom but that more could be done. Hence we revised the materials and offered more one-to-one sessions with the LE. With more interactive in-class activities, the students in the following cohort jelled with one another better and were more receptive to the academic language interventions than students in the previous cohort.

Activities and interventions that received positive feedback from students in the first year were continued in the following year. For example, we began the semester with a short questionnaire that was used partly as a diagnostic tool and partly for information-gathering purposes. In addition to using tailored materials devised by the DA and LE, assignments from past students were also used. These assignments were used as teaching tools, with students evaluating them against marking criteria and as a result coming to an understanding regarding acceptable standards of work.

In addition to the in-class language support, we continued to offer one-to-one consultations with LEs from the CSC if they wished. More students made use of this opportunity in the second year and common issues with writing began to emerge. At the request of the students, student-led group sessions with the LE were arranged. These sessions were deliberately set up as forums where students took control of the learning process. During the group sessions, students taught one another writing, structure, referencing - the elements stressed by the DA and LE.

Concerns about plagiarism resulting from group sessions were not an issue as students worked earnestly on different topics for their research projects, collaborating with one another (Carter, 1999) and modelling the collegial behaviours of the DA and the LE. After the course had finished, some students maintained their contact with the LE to obtain help with assessments for other courses. In addition, these students introduced students outside of the course to the CSC. Had the students not taken advantage of the support provided by the CSC and LE, they would have benefited only from the feedback of the DA in one individual course and hence it would have significantly reduced the opportunity for them to improve.

8. Lessons learned

We summarise the lessons we learned from our experience below:

- *Emphasising the role of the students.* This case study contributes to the literature by putting students in the forefront of the academic language learning process. We provided opportunities for students to actively participate in in-class and after-class learning activities. Research has shown a mixture of self- and peer assessment encourages students to be more responsible and reflective (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999). As demonstrated with our experience, active student participation in the class had a positive follow-on effect on the after-class group sessions.

- *Being flexible to suit the needs of students.* The importance of being flexible to suit the needs of students was highlighted in the literature (Collis & Moonen, 2002). As a result of our first-time experience, we conducted more interactive activities with the second cohort and students appeared to appreciate that. For example, students in the first cohort were shy about meeting with the LE individually, so we increased her presence in class to allow students to know her better. While not scheduled originally, the LE offered group consultation sessions which allowed students to share their ideas and conduct peer-editing of assignments.
- *Providing early and continuous detailed feedback.* Early and continuous detailed feedback provides students with opportunities to learn from their mistakes and improve in subsequent assessments. In relation to feedback is the issue of self-belief and encouragement (Jones, 2008). If students are encouraged consistently that they have the ability to write well, their performance is more likely to improve.
- *Forming and maintaining a collegial relationship between DAs and LEs.* DAs and LEs are a team. We acted as role models with our positive interactions and behaviours that encouraged students to work together to help one another. Collaboration does not have to be limited to one or two meetings. Creating a warm and collegiate atmosphere helps reduce anxiety and encourages students to participate in class (Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Mak, 2011).
- *Making good use of past student assessments.* While some researchers have examined the possibility and appropriateness of reusing assessments (Gehring, 2004; Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2007), we found no evidence in the literature that educators use past assignments in students' learning process. However, our experience shows that making use of anonymised assessments from previous students to highlight the 'dos and don'ts' to reinforce student-centred learning is useful. Students were able to relate to past assessments and hence understand better what was expected of them.

9. Conclusion

This case study reports on the collaborative experience of two educators in their attempt to lift the language proficiency of students by integrating academic language support into a specific course and emphasising the role of the students in the learning process. We believe students are an integral piece of the jigsaw puzzle of effective academic language support. What we have done corresponds to micro level student engagement described in Healey et al. (2010). What makes this study different from previous studies is that students take on active roles in other students' learning process. Not only did they lead class discussions, but they also were in charge of after class peer consultation sessions.

We acknowledge the numbers of students of both cohorts were small and therefore we have no intention to generalise from these results. However, our experience and recommendations might benefit educators who are interested in providing a similar type of integrated language support to their students. To obtain the best outcome and overlapping of efforts from different discipline academics, universities should consider adopting a whole-of-institution approach and developing an overarching strategy for integration of academic learning into selected courses in the entire curriculum of the degrees.

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