A Guide to Academic Language and Literacy
for Transnational Teaching Teams

Transnational students will normally have passed an English proficiency test or equivalent to ensure they meet minimum standards in speaking, reading, writing and listening however many will lack confidence in English and will not possess the vocabulary of the discipline. Students may not have the conversational language skills to perform well in academic English and may have difficulty communicating their understanding.

The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee report on transnational teaching found that pre-entry English language testing is not sufficient to the needs of students entering higher education either on or offshore. The report recommends that ongoing language and learning support should be planned by universities. Academic language and literacy is not something that can be simply fixed in a generic bridging or pre-entry class or by one-off supplemental resources – it is context-specific and developed by degree (AVCC, 2005).

Transnational students like any other students are generally interested in developing deep understandings and problem-solving skills, consciously seeking an international outlook, and viewing international education as a long-term investment in career advancement (see for example Pyvis and Chapman, 2004). Their earlier experiences of education and training however may be different from Australian student experiences.

While students' earlier educational experiences may have encouraged particular approaches such as a focus on memorisation, globalisation influences on educational cultures in Asia are increasingly emphasising critical thinking skills and active learning approaches (Bell, 2008; Mok, 2003). The earlier stereotype of students from Asian cultural backgrounds as taking a surface approach to learning has been refuted (See for example Biggs & Watkins, 1996;

Kember, 2000; On, 1996). Variations in learning styles occur in any class, anywhere.

Academic skills development may need to be built into the course in areas such as: independent research; referencing; literature reviews; essay writing; critical thinking and analysis; problem solving; mathematics; computer programming; group work; presentations; and academic English.

Helping students understand lectures
 A variety of ideas are suggested to support students in understanding lecture materials.

- Provide lecture notes or copies of slides ahead of the class.
- Explain how and when students can ask questions.
- Speak clearly at a slower pace than usual.
- Clearly identify the structure and main concepts of each lecture, and signal subsidiary points and topic changes as they occur.
- Use a plain-English, conversational style.
- Avoid metaphors, or if they are important, explain them.
- Repeat key concepts using different words
- Allow a little longer for students to process slide content.
- Plan changes to student activity within the lecture.
- Summarise the lecture, explain how it relates to the next topic and the assessment task.
- Explain links between the readings and the lecture topics.

Supporting student literacy

Transnational teachers may support student literacy by considering the academic skills needed, and whether there are likely to be any skills gaps. One way is to compare students' skills in, for example; writing, maths, referencing, research, analysis; to those of Australian cohorts.

Teachers may plan opportunities for students to acquire the skills needed to succeed in subjects, for example:

- orientation programs
- online academic skills modules
- subject-specific integrated activities and resources
- pre-work, for example, students are emailed to summarise a reading which is presented in the first class
- extra tutorials for struggling students
- English language workshops
- handouts or links to learning support resources
- bridging programs
- integrated language and learning support with the support of academic language and literacy specialists.

Getting help

Seek support from your University's specialists in embedding academic skills and language support into a subject to:

- develop subject-specific resources or class activities
- design exercises to help students acquire suitable vocabulary, evaluate research, practice critical thinking
- refine assessment tasks and marking criteria
  deliver formative feedback on English language and writing.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Induction into Academic Skills

Centre for Transnational Crime Prevention, UOW

Many students in transnational crime prevention are police or legal officers who have not been to university before. To help them understand expectations and build their academic skills, students in both Wollongong and China completed a series of online modules on academic expectations, research, reading strategies and writing (see http://ctcp.uow.edu.au/resources/). These were developed with support from Learning Development and the Library and supported by a workshop program.

Follow-up workshops were offered before assessment tasks were due. A core subject was redeveloped to include scaffolded assessment tasks and learning resources designed to build students' academic research and writing skills.

Mark Loves and Judith Marychurch, Faculty of Law, UOW

Modifying learning and assessment tasks

Learning and assessment tasks may be modified to build academic skills. For example:

- in-class tasks that model the approach expected in assessment tasks
- examples of student work
- focus on a particular academic skill in an assessment task
- clear expectation in the marking criteria
- split complex reports or long essays into two or more components.

Learning from written materials

Students may need help to learn from written materials.

- Write subject guides clearly and organise reading lists around topic or lecture areas.
- Start with easier readings.
- Limit the amount of reading.
- If readings are dense highlight key passages.
- Consider linguistic difficulty when choosing articles and texts.
- Design activities to help students understand key texts. For example, a comprehension reading activity that helps them to identify the context, the topic under discussion, the author's argument and evidence.
- Encourage students to discuss the readings with each other in pairs or small groups. This activity could be in their own language with a report back in English.

Speaking in the local language

If a course is advertised as part of an English language degree it is essential to provide regular opportunities to interact in English throughout the session. All tutorials should include English language learning and teaching. All assessment tasks should be conducted entirely in English.

There is some debate as to whether or not students should be allowed to speak in their own language in tutorials and small groups. Some teachers believe small group work in the students' own language is helpful to learning and encourages active engagement. There is a suggestion that discussion of concepts in the students' first language may encourage deep learning (Skyrme, 2005).

Others teachers disagree, suggesting that discussion of concepts in students' second language requires the effort of translation in two directions and is not always successful as concepts may not align and arguments may not be equally convincing in both languages (Smith and Smith, 1999). Skyrme suggests one way to deal with this is to accept some use of first language as a natural stage of learning, which students ideally move past as they gain expertise.

In practice, a local subject coordinator or co-teacher may be faced with the need to engage students with difficult subject material and a class of students who resist speaking in English. Insisting on all-English tutorials under these pressures may be unrealistic and undermine both the teacher's and students' commitment to the classroom language policy. It may be more realistic to require an agreed section of the tutorial to be conducted in English.

If some students in the class are from differing language backgrounds then for equity reasons whole-class interactions should be conducted entirely in English. It might not be immediately obvious that students have differing language backgrounds – for instance, mainland Chinese students will generally speak Mandarin while Hong Kong students will talk to each other in Cantonese.

Language and assessment

Where marking criteria explicitly indicate marks for correct use of language then marks may be awarded. Generally marks will be weighted towards criteria related to research, data, structure and critical reasoning rather than correct grammar.

Teachers are not expected to mark up every grammatical error or spelling mistake. Rather, it is appropriate to mark up a few indicative paragraphs and direct students to language development support.

Integrating academic skills into subjects

Learning skills are most effectively developed within a context rather than as generic activities. Integrating subject-specific skills development enables the teacher to:

- check on student progress along with content understanding
- develop academic skills and graduate
- qualities
- prepare students for assessment tasks.

Academic skills instruction doesn't necessarily involve more individual feedback. Whole class feedback and/or peer or self-review of tasks may be provided.

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Transnational Teaching Teams

Professional development for quality enhancement of learning and teaching

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Professional Development Principles

A set of professional development principles for transnational teaching teams informed, and were refined through, the work of the participatory action learning groups in this project.

The principles can be accessed at:
transnationalteachingteams.org