

HOW INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND
ADJUST TO THE UK HIGHER
EDUCATION CONTEXT, AND IN
PARTICULAR TO WRITTEN
ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Overview

- Context and rationale for the research
- Theoretical framework and methodology
- Findings re. recognisable stages that students went through in taking control of assessment practices, including the specifics of writing
- Implications of findings for course design and teachers' practice

Rationale

- ‘a powerful pro-internationalisation policy discourse’ around the benefits that international students bring to the academic environment (Barron et al., 2010, p. 475)
- Tendency to see international students as ‘economically important but academically deficient’ (Coate, 2009, p. 277) e.g. difficulties with level of English, lack of familiarity with UK academic context (Barron et al., 2010, p. 478)
- Integration or adaptation (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005, pps. 13-16)
- Know about transitional and adaptive stresses facing international students when first arrive (e.g. Da Vita, 2007)
- In addition, need to adapt to assessment practices and in particular writing in a range of academic genres

Written practices

- ‘writing is an act of identity’ and ‘writing demands in educational settings are also identity demands’ (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010, p. 228)
- Needs to address the process students use to create texts, viewing writing as a social act situated within a particular context (Hyland, 2003; 2010)
- Involve consideration of how the context is shaped in terms of ‘interests, discourses and power relations’ within the university (Ivanic, 2010)

UK Higher Education context

- Marketisation – operate as businesses; view students as customers (Fairclough, 1995, pps. 140-141)
- Post-92 ‘applied’ university – increasingly corporatised audit / ‘quality’ culture (Newton, 2003)
- National level and institutional policies e.g. Teaching & Learning Strategy, aim to drive ‘reform’ internally (Clegg & Smith, 2010)
- Prescribed course documentation – impact on assessment

Framework of study

Rather than addressing 'deficit' models of international students, the model should be one of assisting the change of learners who may need to 'adapt both their approaches to learning and views of themselves as learners' (Burnapp, 2006, p. 82) .

Research questions

1. How do Pre-sessional and Masters international students at Leeds Metropolitan University understand and 'write' their academic assessments?
2. How do students attempt to take 'control' of this process?
3. How does the experience impact on students' perceptions of self and identity?

Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews explored students' backgrounds /talked through in some detail their understanding and practice in relation to a specific piece of academic work or assessment.
- End of course group interviews attempted to explore changes over time, identify critical incidents and any explanations of how their experiences were unfolding.
- Analysis – constant comparison
- Course documentation collected - QAA and university guidelines, module handbooks, assignment briefs and assessment criteria etc.

Overview of Findings

- **Confusion**
- **Step by step**
- **Ask** (multiple sources)
- **Agency / Control** (over process / stages of task)

Confusion

Understanding the task

- confused about proportions of various elements of the assignment (1)
- nervous because doesn't understand the task (3)
- it's difficult because different from previous experience (4, 2)
“it's very difficult to do for us because er it's a very different method, we cannot do, we cannot do! (laughter)” (4)
- what's the point? [of referencing] (2)

Also: *“The first time I experienced a tutorial ... I was a little bit upset and I was a little bit shocked, because I had no idea what I should talk”* (1)

Step by step

Recognisable stages:

- Choose a topic (1,2,4)
- Find literature (all)
- Take notes (all)
- Do primary research (1, 3)
- Make an outline (all)
- Draft, get feedback, redraft (all)

1 also organised her whole process in stages related to tutorials:
“I have information each stage with paper and tutorials at the same time”

Specifics of writing

- Start with an outline i.e. top-down approach (all)
- Drafting and editing (all) “*many times I write*” (2)
- Skills for avoiding plagiarism (2, 3)
- Tutor feedback (all)
- Peer feedback/ consultation (1, 2)
- Content before language (1,3 explicitly, 4 implicit)
“*[language is] not so important, rather than contents, and coherence through the essay*” (1)

Ask (multiple sources)

- Tutor in class (1, 2, 3), in-session course (1)
- Personal academic tutorials (1, 2)
- Questions to tutor by email (1)
- Written info [handbooks and handouts] (3), library online (1, 4)
- Written and oral feedback on drafts (2, 4)
- Written feedback on previous assignments (1)
- Language & proofreading - friends (2), other international students (2) British friend (1)

Agency / Control

Learning and understanding

- Understanding purpose of task (2, 4, 3)
- Learning from feedback (all 4)
- Learning by doing, recognising they are approaching a goal (4, 1)
- Using criteria (3, 1, 2)
- Using various sources to help them understand – c.f. **ask** 'sources' (all 4)
- New (alien) concept i.e. referencing (2), understanding more about critical thinking and not overgeneralising

Also: *“all the assignments become more difficult and...I feel, actually right now I’m working on a research paper, research article, and I feel erm I’m going back to the beginning level”.*

Agency and Identity

- Gaining agency / control over process
- Link to identity related to self development, *“in here we have to use all time our brain”* (2), *“change in my mind and method”*... *“confident about solving problems myself”* or asking *“if I can’t”*(4) *“I come here to get some systems and my education level”* (4)
- Maintaining academic voice threat to identity? *“need that somebody give me directions”* but *“OK”* (4), *“don’t think about it...we have to follow that system”* (3), *“never doubt, we just follow...don’t feel comfortable with it, but also not uncomfortable”* (1) would rather write in an academic than a ‘personal’ way *“just follow what we’ve got from books and references”* (3+1) *“can hide”* (int) yes (1&3)

Drawing it all together

- (these) students bring considerable 'cultural capital' to studies
- Issue is gaining control over processes / stages of a wide variety of assessment tasks PLUS understanding related cultural / academic conventions
- PLUS THAT tasks are written makes process more difficult
- Key to agency - to develop personal strategies for doing this e.g. organising notes from reading, asking questions and finding information from range of sources, responding to feedback

Implications

- Tutors (subject specific and EAP) bigger role for most international students than their previous studies building support strategies
- Pre-sessionals and in-sessionals encourage effective strategies such as multiple drafts in response to feedback
- Need to be super clear and explicit - task, instructions, marking criteria, use of models / exemplars
- Examine use of such wide range of assessment tasks

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