

Developing Engagement and Agency through Project Work

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Abstract

Research into student writing has shown the central role of writing in promoting language acquisition. Written language is seen as a discourse practice that students must gradually learn in their academic endeavour. Writing in a second or foreign language however poses problems to students whose proficiency in the language is still developing. This article reports the result of a qualitative study that examines how participation in content-based project work helps students' learning. The study is informed by the central premise that views language and literacy learning as situated practices in specific classroom contexts and are acquired as students engage with the subject matter and in specific learning tasks (Zamel & Spack, 2006). Data were collected using focus group interviews, classroom observation and document analysis. Findings of the study indicate that talk around the written text is multilingual and that content-related project work serves as a tool to promote engagement and agency among multilingual learners.

Keywords: academic literacy practices, writing activities, content-based tasks, multilingual learners

INTRODUCTION

Most courses in Malaysian universities require students to produce a written assignment as one of its course evaluation. Students at the undergraduate level are expected to engage with the subject matter and able to write comfortably well in the academic setting once they enter university. This poses problems to students whose prior learning and knowledge in the subject matter are in their first language. Many of these students find writing in L2 as challenging and overwhelming, and this scenario happens regardless of the fact that Malaysian students generally have developed their knowledge of the school subjects in their first language.

Research on writing difficulties faced by Malaysian university students' shows that the majority of the learners are often intimidated by their inadequate vocabulary and inaccurate word choices which restrain them from expressing and elaborating their ideas comfortably (Wahi, 2012). These shortcomings also hinder their chances of getting satisfying results in the course assessments as well as in meeting the demands made of them in the academic setting. Notably, Adzmi, Bidin, Ibrahim and Jusoff (2009) find that the problems of writing difficulty and apprehension toward writing can become more intense at the tertiary level, in which students are expected to write with more maturity and sophistication such as using specialised vocabularies and using correct grammatical structures.

In the same line, Ismail, Darus and Hussin (2012) reveal that students' lack of ability to think critically during their writing process affects their writing quality. The study also highlights that lack of learner autonomy, limited opportunities for the students to interact socially and discuss their writing, and lack of interest among the students in learning academic writing are some of the factors that contribute to writing problems faced by the undergraduate students in Malaysia.

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The aim of this paper is to discuss and elaborate the benefits of using content-based writing project to enhance learning. This paper is part of a larger study that investigates the ways multilingual/bilingual English language learners perceive and respond to literacy practices in English language in their academic interactions. Situated in two content courses that use English as its medium of instruction, the larger study seeks to examine and identify the key literacy constructs as students engage with the literacy practices in English language. Due to space constraint, this paper will only focus on one aspect of the academic practices, that is, how participating in content-based project work help students' literacy learning.

ACADEMIC LITERACIES

The study is informed by the central premise that views language and literacy learning as situated practices in specific classroom contexts and are acquired as students engage with the subject matter and in specific learning tasks (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Zamel & Spack, 2006; Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009). Fundamental in the discussion of this paper is the distinction between an autonomous model and ideological model of literacy (Street, 1984). Street contends that *autonomous model of literacy* conceptualizes literacy as decontextualized skills, a universal set of discrete cognitive skills that can be learned independently from social context and once learnt, are transferable to any context. This model disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin literacy so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal. Looking at literacy as autonomous skills however fails to recognize the cultural ideologies that students bring to the class during their meaning making process. Additionally, viewing literacy as a social practice takes into account the behaviour, the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and writing in the society (Street, 1995).

Leki (2007) defines academic literacies as “membership in[to] communities of academic readers and writers”. She relates academic literacy to the activity of interpretation and production of academic and discipline-based text often within important social contexts such as group-work project or written report, and relies profoundly on students' experience with text. Street and Lefstein (2007) restate this conception on academic literacies as becoming academically literate involves learning to read, write and think in an academic way, which includes language and interaction amongst members of the institution. Inherent in these definitions is the belief that there are certain skills and level of ‘standard’ to be acquired before a person becomes academically literate and that an academic community has its own culture and discourse. In sum, this study refers to academic literacies as being institutionalized into the discourse communities, of being able to read, write, and interact with text appropriate to the community.

READING AND WRITING IN L2

There is a general agreement among researchers that students with diverse cultural and linguistic background respond differently to learning in their second language (Zamel & Spack, 2006; Leki, Cumming & Silva, 2008; Koo, 2008; Morita, 2009). In a study on multilingual students' writing and learning processes across the curriculum, Zamel and Spack (2006) report that students readily acknowledge their linguistic struggles and cross-cultural disorientation as they go through their learning. The participants in the study express concern about their lack of ability to express themselves comfortably in spoken and written English and this might mask their intelligence and knowledge. The participants express their dissatisfaction when reading and writing can be an excruciatingly slow process and that they have to devote a great deal of time to their studies because of their linguistic challenges. Similarly, Kota, a doctoral student in Morita's (2009) study, reflects that he has to struggle to display his knowledge and academic competence because of his limited English ability. Similar difficulties are also reported by other studies (e.g. Spack, 1988; Adzmi, Bidin, Ibrahim & Jusoff, 2009; Ivanic et al. 2009; Wahi, 2012).

Zamel and Spack (2006) highlight the central role of writing in promoting and enhancing language acquisition in content-based instruction. They suggest that “when writing is assigned for the purpose of fostering learning, and when instructors provide supportive feedback in response to what learners have written, writing can serve as a powerful means for promoting language acquisition” (p.126). As the students' papers become teaching tools of the course, writing in the subject matter offers opportunities to engage

actively with the material they are studying and thus give positive impact on the students’ academic progress (Zamel & Spack, 2006). Correspondingly, Freebody and Luke (2003) stress that engagement and participation in texts demands “understanding and composing” meaningful written, visual and spoken texts in ways that connect the meaning to the users and allow them to make meaningful inferences from those connections.

In view of the above, the present study contributes to this current line of research by closely examining the academic literacy practices of bilingual students learning the content subject in English while they are still in the process of mastering the language. A detailed investigation of the case is insightful because it reveals the complex nature of the challenges that L2 students might face in their learning. In analysing the learners’ experinces in doing their project work, 3 inter-related lenses are employed. They are:

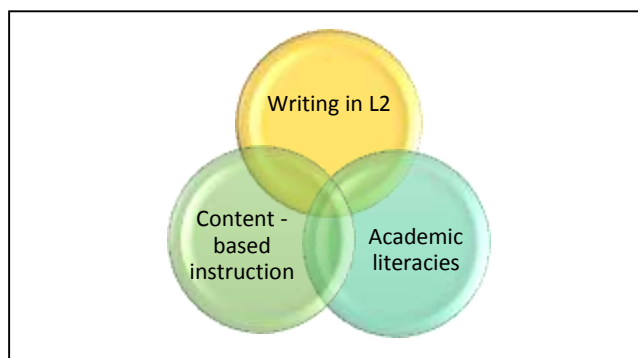


Figure 1 Proposed theoretical lens in analysing students’ project work

METHODOLOGY

This paper reports preliminary results of a larger study that examines academic literacy practices in English language among a group of undergraduate students learning content subjects in English. A total of 12 bilingual students who were in the 2nd year of their studies and two content lecturers took part in this investigation. All of the students were doing undergraduate programmes at the Faculty of Business in one government-funded university. Two content subjects that used English as its medium of instruction were chosen as the focal site of the study. Participants of the study were selected using purposive sampling techniques and participation was voluntary.

Framed within qualitative research paradigm, the study used three major sources of data – focus group interviews, class observations and document analysis. Multiple sources of data are important to establish strong “chains of evidence” (Yin, 2009). The sources of data include transcriptions of the interview data, observation field notes as well as related documents such as students’ project work, class notes and class assignments. Data were collected over a period of one academic session. Table 1 presents a summary of sources of data.

Table 1 Summary of sources of data

Primary data	Secondary data
Students’ interviews	Students’ project work
Teachers’ interviews	Class notes
Observation field notes	Teachers’ notes
	Course-related handouts

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Data gathered for the study show that almost all courses require the students to do a project paper as one of its evaluation components. The project work is usually carried out in groups of 4 to 5 students. Students are usually given between 6 to 7 weeks to complete their project work. For each of the semesters observed, they had between 4 to 5 projects to do in a semester - one project for each course. The students are given a Task Sheet as a guide and they have to conduct their project work outside of the class hours. Supports are given in terms of consultation with the lecturers if they have problems while doing the project and authorisation letters are issued by the faculty when the students are doing their project work outside the campus.

The project work is quite elaborative to meet its 20% weight age. Students are expected to prepare a long report of about 25 to 30 pages. The long report includes sections like executive summary, introduction, research procedure, analysis, conclusion and recommendations. The students are also expected to attach the documents that they obtain from the company that they visit. Examples of the documents are company's corresponding letters, memos and emails to the staff, minutes of meetings as well as pictures of the site.

Positive Learning Experience

In general, course-related project work presents positive learning environment for students. The tasks involved extend the learners' interaction with the learning input. In this activity, students are exposed to structured, patterned ways of behaving that are expected from them as members of an academic community. Table 2 presents a brief summary of the benefits of doing course-related project work.

Table 2 Summary of the benefits of doing project work in Business undergraduate courses

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- Project tasks are interesting, practical and realistic.
 - Reports are written in English.
 - Talk around oral and written text is multilingual.
 - Some projects involve giving oral presentations.
 - Almost all projects require them to work in groups.
 - Project work trains students to relate theories learnt in class to outside world.
 - Some tasks require them to transfer oral language to written language.
 - Students prefer doing project work in groups due to academic workload, elaborative project tasks and time limitation.
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Reconstructing Learning as Ways of Doing

Doing project work presents a change from teacher-controlled-activities which are commonly associated with classroom discourse or classroom activity. In doing their project, the focus of the tasks is on student-initiated response, that is, students make their own choice and decide on what to include in their project. As opposed to lecture-based classroom discourse where the teacher acts as the sole input provider, in this task, students bring in their own critical thinking and the outside world into their learning. They draw connections between what they learn in the classroom with what they see or 'observe' happening in real work situations. At the end of their report, the students are asked to write a critique or comments regarding the theories based on the observation of the real events. Students are also asked to write their own recommendations based on the findings of their research.

In addition, the project work also introduces them to how to conduct small scale research. For example, in one project work on consumer behaviour, they had to observe people's patterns of behaviour while having tea and *roti canai* at Indian Muslim restaurants. For this particular project, they went out as a group and carried out on-site observations. They wrote a group report and conducted an oral presentation in front of the class to present the result. In writing up the report and presenting the result, they referred to the textbook for specific terms and phrases, especially in describing the relevant theories. In another project,

the students were asked to identify the factors that influenced local companies to expand their business into international market. In this project, students had to conduct online research and carry out interview session with the company's management for their written report. In this exercise, students were introduced to local, small business enterprises as well as multinational companies.

A prominent element that is observed in this study is the exclusive use of the textbook as reference for their project work. Students reported that they referred to their textbook to guide the content of their project. To illustrate, before going out to conduct interviews, students would refer to their textbook to identify the questions that they needed to ask during the interviews. Using the contents or elements of the theories that were discussed in the book, they would write their interview questions. As mentioned earlier, in preparing their report, they consulted their textbook to identify the keywords or phrases that were used in the textbook and later employed these phrases in their written report.

CONCLUSION

This study has illustrated how undergraduate bilingual learners respond to English language use in their academic interactions. It demonstrates the significance of content-based project work: 1) to promote the learning of content subjects, and 2) to support language learning. In addition, the data also suggest that the faculty is an important agent in promoting content-based language use. It is imperative and urgent that the faculty and language instructors join hand to develop the learners' linguistic and communicative competence to help learners strengthen their content area literacy.

In this paper, the need to reject the deficit view of literacy in order to encounter students with different backgrounds is made clear (Street & Lefstein, 2007; Koo, 2008; Damber, 2009; Ivanic et al., 2009). There is also a need for content lecturers and language teachers to take note of the different communicative means the students have in order to maximise learning opportunities. Thus, the constructs of academic literacies within the paradigm of literacy as social practice has the potential to bring about new learning experiences and critical perspectives which are needed in order to develop the skills and knowledge needed to be new learners in the 21st century.

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