

Teaching English as a foreign language – a personal exploration of language, alienation and academic literacy.

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Abstract

This article is part personal narrative, part exploration of alienation. By tracing my own journey, I have been able to identify, both on a personal and a professional level, the real and perceived effects of exclusion from a given discourse community. I have looked at the ways in which even one's own language can be experienced as 'foreign' and how this can affect self esteem. I have reflected on my own experiences as I return to the UK (and in particular higher education) after more than a decade abroad, and by recording the thoughts and feelings of students and subject tutors as they engage with academic tasks, I have gained an insight into what lies behind the student disengagement I encounter on a daily basis. Drawing on my own research and the work of Sarah Mann, I conclude that a more creative approach, both to the processes of teaching and assessment and models of student support in HE is needed if we are to close the gap between the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders' of the academic community and to allow an increasingly diverse student population to find their voice.

This is my story

By allowing ourselves to be known and seen by others, we open up the possibility of learning more about our topic and ourselves, and in greater depth (Ethrington, 2004:25).

Twelve years on a Greek island teaching English, with limited success it has to be said, to students who ranged from bored teenagers to highly motivated adults, had

left me with serious doubts regarding both my own skills as a language teacher and the widely the accepted approaches to language teaching as enshrined in the 'EFL course book'. Something was missing; something very basic, essential to language learning, wasn't being communicated, but I didn't know what it was. It was time for a change, the UK beckoned once more.

I signed up to a newly accredited Postgraduate programme at the University of Plymouth and found myself attempting to complete a 60 credit Masters level course in just over a month. This course was specifically designed to enable the qualified and experienced TEFL teacher to make the transition from overseas private language schools to UK institutions of Higher Education. Our mission was to learn how to teach EAP (English for Academic purposes) as opposed to TENOR (English for No Obvious Reason) to the increasing numbers of overseas students choosing to take their degrees in the UK.

At the heart of the course lay the fundamental question: What exactly do non-native English speaking students need to succeed in the UK? The answer didn't seem to be more language, these students already had unconditional offers and reasonable IELTS scores, so we focussed instead on 'study skills'. It all seemed perfectly logical and rational, of course they needed to know how to reference according to the Harvard system, structure an academic essay and give an oral presentation. Don't all students? However, as I began teaching on a four week pre-sessional, some interesting issues began to arise: There was the Chinese student who would not raise his eyes from the floor during his oral presentation but who could write with near- native fluency; the Dutch student who could speak with such eloquence and confidence and yet had little more than a tenuous grasp of acceptable written conventions; the super bright Czech student who continually railed against my attempts to explain referencing, furious that she couldn't say "anything of her own". How could I possibly address these diverse concerns in a matter of four weeks? I did what I could.

The pre-sessional over, I returned to teaching English privately. The nagging doubts about the conventional approaches to language teaching grew. Surely we were failing our students when a proficient user with over 20 years experience of teaching

English in her own country was equally as bewildered as a newly arrived beginner by a simple, everyday question like “D’ya wanna cuppa?” I began to suspect that the only real language learning that went on took place in the college bar on a Friday night. Perhaps a broader look at the education would help. I found myself enrolling, at the very last minute, on a PGCE in Post-compulsory Education. It was my turn to feel as if I had beamed down into an alternative universe as I suddenly found myself straining to understand a language that I had believed was my own. Surely I belonged here in this classroom? I had a degree, perhaps not from an institution that would have been known as a university even before 1992, but, I reminded myself, I had just successfully completed a demanding postgraduate qualification within a highly pressurised timescale. Surely that counted for something? So why couldn’t I understand what they were saying? What was a FENTO and why did it have to be mapped? Was a ‘SoDal’ a joke? Who were LLUK and the IfL? And what on earth was a learning outcome? I gripped my small bag of cultural capital a little more tightly.

Two years later, here I am. I have just completed the final module of the PGCE. My FENTO standards are mapped against my practice, I have reflected, self-evaluated and achieved all the learning outcomes. I am no longer a ‘stranger in a strange land’, and yet I still deal on a daily basis with those that feel they are. I work in higher education, just as I had hoped, and my job is to deliver study skills support. Yet my work is not primarily with overseas students as I had expected, in fact the majority of undergraduates I work with are native English speakers, British born and bred. However, the irony is that the ‘language’ of academia they are required to learn to succeed and survive may just as well be foreign.

Working closely with a whole range of students, many of whom have come into higher education through ‘non –traditional’ routes, I have been amazed by the number who find academic discourse impenetrable. Most come through my door saying that they don’t know how to reference, but what they really mean is that they have no idea how to produce a piece of ‘academic’ writing. At first I thought this ‘problem’ would be easy to remedy; I had a stack of Study Guides they could take away with them; one that showed them how to reference according to the Harvard system, another that explained how to structure an essay, there was a punctuation

guide, one on proof reading and, of course, me, someone they could work with on a one to one basis to improve their general writing skills. As the academic year progressed my diary got busier and busier. Soon I was seeing eight, sometimes more, students a day, and for every eight I saw, another eight couldn't get an appointment. What was going on? I began to listen more carefully.

I decided to start recording these study skills sessions. Most students were happy to oblige and those that didn't wish to be captured were open and honest about their feelings in a way I felt they probably weren't with their subject tutors. For them I was both 'insider' and 'outsider', someone who could understand and empathise with what they were saying, and yet someone who, as an official representative, must also have some insight into the mysterious language and culture of the academic institution. Listening back to the recordings, an interesting picture began to emerge: These students were not bored generation Y technophiles, nor were they lazy or illiterate, but they were, without a doubt, experiencing a significant amount of frustration, confusion and bewilderment.

- "I don't know how to write it in the way they're asking me and still make it interesting"
- "if I could talk through my essays there'd be no problem"
- "it's just really boring"
- "I can't write anything of my own"
- "I've completed my assignment, I've done what they asked from me"

Their alienation from the processes of learning and assessment they were involved in was tangible. Much of the frustration was directed at 'them', the subject tutors, the markers of their work, the 'holders of power'. There was a definite sense that the students believed the markers could be appeased and good marks gained, if only they knew what 'they' wanted. So, what did they want? Using the 'Think Aloud' technique pioneered by Someren, Barnard and Sandberg (1994), I began also to investigate tutors' thoughts and feelings as they engaged in the processes of assessment. As I listened, I became fascinated by the language being used: "Fragmented, well-evidenced, coherent, well-presented, superficial, anecdotal, embedded, underpinned, relevant, spurious ... " It was clear that these words meant

something to the subject tutors, but I had a sneaking suspicion that they would mean nothing to most of the students I came into contact with.

According to Sarah Mann (2001: 11), in recent years we have seen a kind of mass immigration whereby a new breed of students now occupy a position “akin to the colonized or migrant from the colonized land”. The power relations that are still at work in higher education, what Mann (2001:13) terms, “the unequal distribution of power within the teaching and learning relationship, and the ownership by lecturers and the institution of the means for, and values given to, work produced through assessment”, perpetually reinforce the ‘migrant’s’ place at the bottom of the hierarchy. And, according to Bauer and Trudgill (1998), this power is enshrined in the language of academia:

... in an age where discrimination in terms of race, colour, religion or gender is not publicly acceptable, the last bastion of overt social discrimination will continue to be a person’s use of language (cited in Burns and Finnigan 2003:127)

Like the overseas students I first came into contact with two years ago, by entering a UK university non-traditional students quickly finds themselves at a “double disadvantage” (Granger, 2002:132). Knowledge and experience is suddenly negated both by the language of academic discourse and the power relations at play. The resulting estrangement is located in the way students are denied access to academic discourse. Assignment briefs, marking criteria, feedback, lectures, tutorials, even learner support, are all couched in terms that reinforce the barriers between the members of the discourse community and those on the outside.

If higher education is to do more than pay lip service to widening participation, and if our mission as educators really is to embrace a truly diverse student population, then as Northedge (2003a: 17) argues, this challenge requires “a more radical shift in teaching than simply incorporating remedial support within existing teaching programmes”. Study skills support, whether provided as a bolt-on or somehow ‘embedded’ in subject specialisms, is little more than an institutional response, a sticking plaster, that is doing little but masking an increasingly festering wound. I

believe that the huge financial and emotional investment that students are required to make nowadays in order to study in higher education deserves a more creative and thoughtful response. Either we need to think long and hard about the way we provide and promote access to academic discourse, or more radically, we need encourage students to find their own academic voice, not by 'dumbing down' content or 'lowering standards', but by embracing alternative forms of knowledge, and by providing a flexible and truly inclusive approach to assessment. Only then can we truly claim to celebrate and respect the rich tapestry of lives and experience that now make up our student populations. To insist that academic knowledge can only be valued if it is presented according to the set of narrow conventions that still define most of which is termed 'academic' writing, denies students their voice, requiring them to "repress their being as non-rational, creative, unconscious and desiring selves, the very selves which they may need for engaging in learning" (Mann, 2001: 13).

And so I come back to my Greek charges of long ago and the fundamental problem I still wrestle with; the nature of language and how it can best be 'taught', if indeed it can be taught at all. A language can be 'foreign' in many senses of the word and any language which is not that of our everyday world is bound to be at the very least awkward and unfamiliar. Language that does not 'belong' to us is likely to be misused, misconstrued and misinterpreted, it may even be perceived as a threat to our very identity, something we need to distance ourselves from in order to protect our fragile self-esteem (Baron and Byrne, 1994). It seems to me that it is perhaps out of this very desire to preserve a coherent sense of self that the disengaged (and much maligned) surface/strategic learner has been born.

Our clumsy attempts to resolve the tension between the novice and the expert user of any language or discourse, whether it be the TEFL course book or the study skills handbook, often do little but compound the problem by robbing their target audience of their own 'authentic' voice. Just as my Greek students were unable to wrest anything meaningful out of the 'useful' phrases provided to help them write in English, neither can most undergraduates gain much from the 'how to write an academic essay' approach of most study skills materials. Academic writing is not painting by numbers, although if the instructions are followed carefully and skillfully enough the product may possibly give the illusion of mastery. By encouraging our

students to believe that there is indeed a 'magic formula', we stifle individuality, crush creativity and deny them the right to experiment with the unfamiliar discourse/language and therefore make it their own. If our students are to develop any true fluency we need to provide them not with a guide, but with "opportunities to speak and write the discourse in the presence of a competent speaker who can, by responding, help to shape their usage" (Northedge, 2003b: 178). No matter who our students are or where they are from, surely this is what learning support is really about.

Brookfield (1995:28) states that "consulting our autobiographies as teachers and learners puts us in the role of the "other" ... we become viscerally connected to what our own students are experiencing". The last two years have certainly been an insightful journey for me, one that continually informs and influences the way I deal with students on a daily basis. In writing this piece I have started to find a voice that I am comfortable with; it is personal, passionate and most of all it is mine.

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