

# EFL Academic Reading Across Disciplines

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This paper reports findings of a study that investigates academic reading practices across disciplines and recommends strategies to assist students, using the medium of EFL, to deal with the reading demands in the Australian university context. The study builds on previous research by the same authors (Kelly & Widin, JALT Proceedings 1999), in which they found that graduate students from SE and East Asia experienced two key differences in their academic reading practices between home and the Australian context. These were firstly, the nature of the reading tasks and secondly, the quantity of reading required.

This present paper describes areas of conflicting expectations of international students and their lecturers and then describes a framework for lecturers to systematically address the reading needs of their international students. Particular attention is given to scaffolding of reading tasks, design of assessment tasks and the selection and quantity of reading. Research

methods include analysis of course reading requirements and assessment tasks and interviews with students and lecturers. The authors draw of data from two discipline areas, Engineering and Education. The focus is on the role and responsibilities of the subject lecturer and the authors argue that if lecturers do not adopt strategies to assist international students in reading the students may be denied the opportunity to fully engage with the academic discipline.

### The issue

Many international students studying in Australian universities experience a number of difficulties as they adjust to culturally unfamiliar academic conventions using the medium of EFL. A particular area of difficulty appears to be the quantity and the nature of the reading tasks required of students (Kelly & Widin 1999). From that earlier study we learned that what students found to be different and difficult was the fact that reading forms an integral part of course work and that required knowledge is not just a matter of lectures. Students found that reading has a discursive function which invites readers to digress beyond immediate concepts of the lecture; they cannot rely only on information from the lecturer; nor can they rely on the reading to be a substitute for the lecture. The following excerpts from student interviews illustrate how the students perceived

these differences in the reading demands of their courses:

*the lecturer gave us readings, I thought I don't have to listen carefully to lecture (it is difficult accent) because ideas will be in reading. I was surprised and very disappointed because {the reading} was not exactly what the teacher said .*

*going to lecture is not the only thing to do... after you have a lot of work by yourself - reading.*

*I was focussing on content, thought lecturer would ask about what's in the text but they discussed why the author wrote like this.*

### The research project

We interviewed students and lecturers about the role of reading in their subjects. We asked students to describe how they understood the roles of reading and the reading strategies they employed. Participants in this present study have come from Japan, Korea, China, S E Asian countries and Bangladesh.

We asked the lecturers to describe their teaching practices in regards to academic reading. We also examined lecturers written course documents. Lecturers came from the disciplines of Education and Engineering. This paper outlines a framework to guide lecturers in



foregrounding the role of reading at all stages of subject delivery. Particular attention is given to scaffolding of reading tasks, design of assessment tasks and the selection and quantity of reading. However before elaborating this framework we wish to firstly offer an explanatory note about definition of terms and secondly to summarise pertinent issues arising from the literature on tertiary literacy in the Australian context.

### Tertiary Literacy

There is a growing body of literature addressing the notion of tertiary literacy in regard to the native speaking (NS) and NNS population of Australian universities. New student groups have made for a more culturally, linguistically and educationally diverse student body with concomitant challenges for teaching and learning. These challenges range from accommodating diverse knowledge schemas of students at entry level to agreement about exit levels of competency in academic communication skills (variously defined as literacy, that is, reading and writing), oral interaction, negotiation, and interpersonal communication skills (Threadgold, Absalom, Golebiowski 1998).

Key issues that emerge from the research relevant to our study include: alternative ways that universities have responded to students in terms of assistance and accommodation of difference; different perspectives on the nature of cultural difference in valued knowledge,

learning styles and literate behaviour (here the literature takes two main views, one that highlights cultural difference (Hird 1999) and the other that critiques what it calls cultural essentialism (Kubota 1999)), and subject lecturers' perceptions of what counts for literate behaviour within disciplines. In relation to the first issue, models of assistance vary from totally discrete bridging, supplementary communications, short courses or individual assistance through to fully integrated communications modules within mainstream courses. Literacy specialists teach the former, while the latter may be taught by a team or by subject lecturers only.

In relation to the third key issue, very little research into assumptions underlying the language-related aspects of course work at Australian universities has been done (Reid & Mulligan, 1998).

Our data on lecturers' views and practices about this issue revealed a significant variation in responses. One of the most surprising findings was the lack of confidence amongst staff to address their students' language needs. This was due to the lecturers' own limited knowledge of literacy practices or how to convey this knowledge to students.

In summary there is a growing recognition of the complexities of tertiary literacy, but no clear resolution of whose responsibility it is to address student needs in this regard. In the context of diminishing government resources for public universities any further support

for staff development or provision of course specific literacy services for students is unlikely. We would argue that generally speaking, most current models of practice (with some notable exceptions, see Reid and Mulligan, 1998) operate from a deficit view of literacy, one that locates the 'problem' in the individual student who then becomes responsible for the development of his or her own academic literacy skills. Such practice stands in direct opposition to the now widely accepted views of the 'new literacy studies' (Gee, 1990). These social practice approaches to literacy or, more accurately 'literacies' identify repertoires of literacy practices or conventions specific to particular purposes and contexts. We would argue that it is equally the responsibility of the members of the academic community to explain and teach their conventions.

### **International students' experiences of academic reading**

Student data from our present study reveals that academic reading difficulties include: lack of background knowledge and links with other texts; the length of time it takes to complete required reading (twice as long as local English L1 students); unfamiliarity with the nature of specific reading tasks; inadequate written assignment instructions; and the absence of explicit discussion about readings. Here are some of the students' words.

*I read everything that I am supposed to but sometimes I am at a loss ... I can't read between the lines. I can read the words, though the language is a bit different to what I am used to, it isn't the terminology, it is the background knowledge and the references to other texts that I don't know. I experience this with most subjects.... I just don't know how to catch up with this knowledge.*

*I have to read all the time, all weekend. I did come here to study but I didn't know that I would have this much trouble with reading.*

*...the lecturer we have for {subject X} assumes that we all know about the research of {Y}. I'm not sure if I have to read the original research or interpretations of their work.*

*When the topic is broad I don't know how far to go.*

*It is very difficult to get interested if don't have a preview from teacher.*

Although students applied a range of effective academic reading strategies to help themselves, our concern here is about strategies that lecturers may apply. Our findings show that reading is one of the major difficulties that students encounter in their Australian academic studies. In contrast to student experiences, lecturers did not perceive these difficulties with reading



and gave very little overt focus to the role of reading.

### Lecturers' experience

We found that lecturers have a very high expectation of what role reading plays in the subject yet this is mostly not well documented, that is, not made explicit in the subject objectives or outlines. One lecturer noted:

*The student uses reading to give authority to their views. These views are formulated through their reading and are given in an owned way. The way the student thinks about a certain topic is then backed up by evidence in his/her reading. Also at post-graduate level this evidence has to have a range, that is, more than one authority. However, this expectation is not made explicit in any subject outlines I have seen.*

Lecturers seem to abide by a formula of approximately 3 hours of independent work for every hour of face to face. This includes reading and assignment writing, yet there is often no explicit links made between the reading and writing demands of the subject. We noted a lot of good practice (eg. lecturers giving verbal instructions to the class about focus for reading such as focus questions, previews or talking through assessment tasks). However we found that this is not necessarily documented, for example, in subject objectives, reading guidelines, formal

teaching of academic conventions, writing elaborated assignment instructions or making available sample assignment texts. An implication for international students and others is an increased burden on listening without a written backup system. In fact a number of interviewees, through the process of the interview, came to understand the enormity of the mismatch between the implicit nature of their expectations of academic reading and the students' access to this knowledge during subject delivery. This is a sobering finding when one considers the underlying premise of academic practices in Australian universities, its critical and investigative approach to tertiary education, and yet, how one goes about this may remain a mystery to the student.

However well lecturers may articulate their expectations, we also found widely divergent views about what constitutes academic literacy practices for specific subject areas. In summary, while reading has a central role in course delivery, it would appear that knowledge of academic reading conventions within a discipline remains largely assumed rather than officially and explicitly incorporated into subject delivery. While our focus is international students, more elaborated strategies will also benefit local English L1 students. Our findings are consistent with current research into Australian tertiary literacy practices, for example, Pearce and Borland (1998).

## Implementing reading strategies

So what can subject lecturers do to help international students overcome some of these barriers to satisfying engagement with the ideas of their disciplines? An initial step is for lecturers to ask themselves:

- i) What is the purpose of the readings in my subject?
- ii) What prominence do I give them?
- iii) How do I make them prominent? If I do not make them prominent, why not?
- iv) How do I make the readings accessible?

In our interviews we found that simply posing these questions heightened lecturers awareness of taken for granted knowledge they carried but did not share with students or make visible in subject documents. For example answering question (i) requires the lecturer to articulate criteria for inclusion or exclusion of certain texts in a collections of readings; is the purpose of any given text to introduce a concept, to 'cover' lecture content or to supplement it? Question (ii) invites the lecturer to consider how visible is the role of reading in official subject documents.

In detailing strategies or activities for the lecturer to implement in answering questions (iii) and (iv) we have used a framework from Reid, Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, (1998) in which they identify *four kinds of interpretive framing in an attempt to discover how students make*

*meaning from what they read* (p1). We take each of these 'frames' and describe some teaching strategies that lecturers can carry out for each of them.

## Extra-textual features

By extra-textuality the authors refer to the background knowledge or knowledge of key concepts that the text itself assumes of its readers or that the lecturer assumes students bring to the subject. We would add assumed knowledge about literacy conventions. Remember the student above who said:

*it is the background knowledge and the references to other texts that I don't know. I experience this with most subjects.... I just don't know how to catch up with this knowledge.*

...or the other student who said:

*I was focussing on content, thought lecturer would ask about what's in the text but they discussed why the author wrote like this*

It is clear from our data that international students experience the greatest difficulty with the extra textual features of written texts or classroom talk. Assumed



knowledge by its very nature is hidden and therefore hard to identify. Lecturers need to identify:

- i) Assumed background knowledge of the content of their subject and
- ii) Assumed knowledge of the literacy conventions to be applied in their subject.

They need to ask themselves, what concepts do they or the readings assume students already have and then check these assumptions with the students. For example in our data, some students had little or no knowledge of the early 20th century western psychologists, Skinner and Piaget, yet assigned texts and tasks assumed this knowledge. Assumed knowledge of literacy conventions is most often reflected in the lack of explicit instructions of how to complete assignment tasks. Lecturers assume students 'should' know how to develop the topic in the way that the lecturer intends. There is not space in this short article to show examples of elaborated assignment instructions. Suffice to say that the information provided should richly describe:

- Task objectives or outcomes,
- The resources (literature) required to complete the task,
- The kind of text to be produced (i.e. genre), and

- Specific criteria by which the lecturer will judge the finished product

### Inter-textual features

Inter-textual features refer to the cross references of ideas or authors made within a text or across a series of texts, or within a book. Reid and Mulligan (1997), claim that students do not appreciate the significance of such references and so they do not look them up as an aid to comprehension. The common practice in our study of lecturers presenting students with a collection of relevant readings, usually comprised of a selection of journal articles or book chapters has both benefits and drawbacks. It has the advantage of providing a range of ideas from up to date sources. However, as one of our interviewees pointed out, these texts are decontextualised - the bibliographic information gives the students the source of the text but it does not tell the student where it comes from in the sense of what type of text it is in the first place, this is clear in its original context. This lecturer went on to suggest the need for some editorial coherence:

*I suggest that lecturers write an abstract for each article and in this make clear what the purpose of the text is, what type of text it is and how it links with other texts in the book of readings.*

## Circum-textual and Intra-textual features

These final two frames refer to features within a text (Reid et al 1998), such as abstracts, focus questions or footnotes and features of generic structure such as paragraphs, subheadings and other cohesive markers. We found that students were quite skilled in recognising the importance of such features. However here we want outline a final set of strategies for the lecturer to apply. We call them 'talking through the text'. They include:

- Use of focus questions to guide students in purpose for reading. When asked how lecturers could help one student said:
 

*The lecturer gives questions after we read but we need questions before reading. It's good to get lecturer explanation of important parts of text before we read*
- Written summaries of readings
- Modelling a critical reading process with questions such as:
  - What is the topic?
  - What is this text about?
  - Why is the topic being written about?
  - How is the topic being written about?
  - What other ways are there to write about the topic?
  - Who is writing to whom? (adapted from Wallace 1992)

## Conclusion

This study highlights the experience of international students in an Australian university and demonstrates the need for further investigation into the developing field of tertiary literacy. It is in the interests of all students that the academy resolves the issue of whose responsibility it is to address student needs in this regard.

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