

The Language of Our Teaching: Do The Students Really Relate?

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As an institution of higher learning, university is where a significant number of expectations meet. Societies place university at a key position, calling upon its role as the authority to grant both academic and professional degrees that cover major disciplines in the natural and social sciences. For the students, it is an institution that will provide them with the wide-ranging knowledge in specialized academic disciplines, which may, in the long term, lead to further research studies. For the academics, it is the final step in formal education where they hope to meet an experienced student body that is ideally characterized as more motivated, focused and eager to learn. Thus, the nature of university teaching/learning activity becomes one that negotiates between all the expectations and requirements. In due course of this negotiation, students follow programs that aim to equip them with the knowledge and skills required by their chosen fields of study, during which they are demanded to perform a series of activities, through which they will be entering a new discourse community that is posed by the very institution of university. They will be asked to learn and suitably apply the peculiar norms, conventions, expectations and methods of this discourse to become conversant with it. They will listen to lectures, take notes, participate in class discussions, do presentations on topics of importance in their fields, write essays in response to a problem or an issue and compose research papers and dissertations. Through these, students will not only become members of this discourse community but also contribute to it.

In the particular context of English Language Teaching Departments, academic discourse plays a more crucial role because it is the academic literacy of a foreign language that is demanded of the students. English for academic purposes becomes an inevitable subdomain of the teacher education curriculum and these non-native speakers of English, who are at the same time prospective teachers of English, learn academic English through academic tasks, texts and content matter, thereby making its instruction highly pragmatic. Thus, in addition to the broad goal of endowing prospective teachers with *vocational competence*, the endowment of *academic competences* emerge as a parallel goal for the same student body.

The Study

What sparked this study was a heartfelt concern that emerged in the practicum course of senior students at the Department of English Language Teaching at a high-ranking state university in Istanbul. The students were asked to write an observation report on the “language of the teacher” and a short note added to one report demanded attention.

Very briefly, the note was an expression of inadequacy in the context of academic language use. The student felt the importance of academic discourse but did not feel competent to meet the academic and technical demands on his language use.

This was one student making a very sincere remark but it was alarming: Were we really burdening our students with our high expectations of academic discourse? Can they really understand and relate to the language of our lectures, the articles that we have them read and critique? How much of a meaningful academic communication depends on our skills as instructors and how much depends on our students’ proficiency in academic language skills?

So, in order to address these issues, the following questions were formulated:

1. What are the reflections of prospective teachers of English on the kind of language demanded by their university courses?
2. What is their self-assessment of the actual academic language use in these courses?
3. To what extent can the reported area of difficulty be rectified by either the instructors or modifications made in the curriculum?
4. In what way will this experience of academic discourse affect these prospective teachers regarding their use of English in their teaching contexts in the future?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 75 Turkish prospective teachers: 53 females and 22 males. The study took place at the end of the 2006-2007 Fall Semester and at the time of the study, these prospective teachers had been doing their practicum at different primary and secondary schools in Istanbul. They were all native speakers of Turkish and had volunteered to take part in the study among a population of 98 fourth-year students.

All these prospective teachers had studied English in primary and/or secondary schools as a compulsory foreign language for 4-7 years before starting their undergraduate studies. Their

undergraduate program did not offer them a preparatory year of English, so they started their program immediately. The program included basic skills courses in the first year and continued with courses in methodology, language acquisition, literary studies, translation and current topics in foreign language education.

Data collection and analysis

To answer the first two and the fourth research question, the prospective teachers were given a questionnaire designed by the researcher. The items on the questionnaire aimed to explore the beliefs of the prospective teachers on academic language demands in general and how well they coped with these demands in particular.

To address the third question on what can be done to improve the means to cope with the linguistic demands of the academic discourse, 14 randomly selected prospective teachers were interviewed. The interviews were created to investigate the teacher candidates' assumptions, understandings and ideas on the issues concerned.

Data collected from the above mentioned sources were analyzed by means of qualitative and quantitative strategies. The questionnaire was analyzed by taking the frequency counts for each question, except for Question 10. This open-ended question and prospective teachers' reflections were analyzed by means of pattern coding as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984) for qualitative data analysis.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the first set of questions on the questionnaire yielded the profile of these prospective teachers (Appendix1). All of the prospective teachers had received a minimum of 4 years of English instruction prior to their undergraduate studies. 71 of these prospective teachers received this instruction in state schools, whereas 4 of them did so in private institutions. 68 had decided to study English Language Teaching as their first choice, when for 5 a major in ELT was a second option. One chose it as a third option, and still another teacher candidate opted for ELT as their 4th choice. 61 prospective teachers assessed themselves as "competent" and 14 as "incompetent" users of the English language and when asked to rank the effect of this (in)competence on their academic achievement, 20 placed it at the top (most effective) while 37 ranked it at 4th place, 14 at 3rd, and 4 at 2nd place.

In ranking the four language skills according to their level of difficulty, respondents reported that it is in listening (with the mean score of 3.15) and speaking (with the mean score of 3.09), that they have the most difficulty with. Even though this is not a surprising finding, there are several other factors to take into account in the context of university teaching, one of which is space and distancing. University lectures characteristically mark the space of communication between the teacher/instructor and the students/audience. The lecturer usually has their marked space in a physically elevated and enclosed area to deliver the lecture and it is from this mark that communication is governed. Even when the lecturer directs questions at the students, making room for interaction, students want to maintain this distance that guarantees their independence. Thus, the physical layout leads to the “reciprocal distancing” (Bourdieu, 1982) of the teacher and student.

When asked to write what would help them comprehend lectures and seminars better, prospective teachers placed the burden mostly on the lecturers/instructors as they marked the options that said using visuals (28), interaction with students (16), relating the topic to the real world (9), using simple language (6), and using body language (4). The only element here that the student takes responsibility for is listening more attentively (3). These findings could suggest a reflection of the conventional teacher role perceived by the students even at university level. (Appendix 1)

Regarding how they felt about preparing oral presentations, 40 replied affirmatively and 35 negatively. As for the problem areas in preparing oral presentations the most marked item was “organizing information into coherent structure”, which is actually not a language skill but a communication skill. The second most marked item of “self confidence” is not an insufficiency of language skills either. Only in the third place do we see a problem area denoting a lack of language skills.

Regarding reading, the majority (55) of prospective teachers considered themselves skilled readers in academic English. As for the problem areas in reading academic texts, nearly half of the respondents reported that it is the lack of academic vocabulary that causes difficulty in reading academic texts. This draws attention to the need for interdisciplinary academic vocabulary, which is different from specialist vocabulary.

When asked to consider their exam writing skills, the majority of respondents (52/75) reported that they did not have any problems understanding the exam questions but that they could not organize their ideas in the form of meaningful answers. 9 prospective teachers stated that they could not distinguish between what is important and what is not in writing. Similarly, 9 prospective teachers stated that they had no problems in writing exams. And 5 teacher candidates said that they had problems in writing answers because they had problems understanding the exam questions. The problem areas causing most difficulty for these prospective teachers were using academic English norms and composing a cohesive text. The results point to a lack of training, as one has to be taught the standards of academic writing.

When asked to choose from a list of items the ones that would improve their overall command of academic English, the prospective teachers mostly reported a need for native speakers of English as instructors. This is a reflection of the prospective teachers' perception that expertise in a language and its use correlates directly with its native speaker. Actually, it is an agreed upon fact that expertise in language use refers to a learned, partial and relative state. These prospective teachers, who follow along the lines of the native speaker fallacy, and rest their hopes for a better academic language use with a native speaker of English instructing them, will have to see for themselves that this belief might extend to their own professional practices in the future in the form of employment concerns and professional search for an identity. This is not to say, of course, that the need for native speakers should be ignored. Yet, their teaching credibility should not be placed higher than that of non-native teachers and academics.

Results also indicate that more than half of the respondents reported the need for an additional preparatory year that could offer them courses in Academic English and, thereby, prepare them for the kind of studies that await them in the undergraduate programs.

In the last section of the questionnaire, almost all respondents (73/75) reported that they would consider using English as the language of communication in their teaching contexts. Finally, more than two-thirds (52/75) of the prospective teachers reported that they felt confident to pursue academic studies abroad among native speakers of English, whereas one-third did not.

After collecting data through the structured questionnaire, 14 randomly selected prospective teachers were interviewed regarding the overall language use in their present context and their use of English in their teaching contexts in the future. An evaluation of the subjects' responses presented some common issues that were scrutinized. An appreciation of an insistence on communicating in English only was the most articulated point about the language of teaching. Among the other issues addressed, the most interesting finding was that quite a number of students felt that the more academic literacy they had, the more "professional" they felt. The following statement illustrates this:

"When we discuss an article in class and I express my opinions on the subject in academic language, I feel like a professional. I really like it because I feel like I am an authority. I'm not- I know, but it's good to know that I can use the language for it."

Although the word is not used, what is expressed here is student's *empowerment* through language. Students recognize the authorized, prestige language but may have limited knowledge of its usage. The ability to have access to the language of authority brings power over language to those who engage in it and it creates an authority effect (Bourdieu, 1982).

To summarize, data collected from the prospective teachers during the interviews have contributed to the study of how these soon-to-be English teachers felt about the language used in class, their own use of language for academic reasons and their future use of it in their teaching contexts. Their responses to questions revealed that they were aware of the significance of the issues concerned. As for us, academics, this study suggests some points to make note of for our future teaching:

1. We need to make room for interaction however reluctant the students seem to be.
2. The receptive skill of listening may have a greater importance than is usually attached to it.
3. The need for vocabulary should not stop at the specialist level. Prospective teachers' need for academic vocabulary to have better insight into research processes, analyses and evaluation should be taken into account.
4. Needs analysis is critical for the teaching of academic language.
5. With the integration of carefully planned EAP courses into the curriculum, an awareness of academic power relations can be created and prospective teachers can be encouraged to address issues and ideas that can contribute to the improvement of their own academic lives and classrooms.

References:

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