

Issues in assessing the academic writing of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds: Preliminary findings from a study on lecturers' beliefs and practices

Chi Baik

The University of Melbourne, Australia

The question of how lecturers assess the written work of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds is an important issue for Australian universities, as International and English as a Second Language (ESL) students make up a significant proportion of the student cohort, and students' academic success depends largely on their ability to demonstrate academic competence through written assessment tasks. The literature on this topic points to concerns that ESL students are being assessed differently to Native-English speaking (NS) students and that lecturers' cultural expectations influence the grading of written work by students from different cultural backgrounds.

The paper reports the preliminary findings from a study investigating how lecturers assess students' academic writing. The study aimed to address the key questions:

What factors inform or influence lecturers' assessment of students' written work? How "tolerant" are lecturers to various ESL writing errors (i.e. ESL writing that deviates from Standard Written English)? Do lecturers apply the same standards in assessing the written work of ESL and native English-speaking students?

Issues to do with reliability, bias and equity are discussed in the paper and it is argued that continued research on assessment practices is essential in informing the development of appropriate departmental and institutional assessment policies.

Introduction

In the past decade, Australian universities have seen a significant growth in the number of international ESL students, mainly from South East and North East Asia. In the period from 2002-2007 there was a 52.8 percent increase in enrolments by students from North-east Asia and a 112.3% increase in students from Southern and Central Asia, 31.5% of whom came from South East Asia, 35.1% from North East Asia and 12.8% from Central and Southern Asia (Department of Employment, 2007, 2002). Currently, international students make up over 25% of all students enrolled in Higher Education institutions in Australia.

This large growth in the number of International ESL students in Australian universities has led to increased attention on the level of students' English language skills and growing concern about the lowering of standards (Birrell, 2006; Watty, 2007). Recent studies have shown that even when international ESL students have achieved the minimum English language entry requirements, many of them struggle to meet the demands of their mainstream university courses (Birell, 2006; Bretag, 2007). According to Birell (2006:61) there is "wide spread recognition of the English problem" in Australia, and universities cope by "lowering the English demands in the courses they teach."

This issue has received considerable media attention in the past few years. One of the leading Australian newspapers recently reported the findings of Birrell's study (2006) which showed that over one third of overseas students who had graduated from Australian universities and had subsequently obtained permanent resident visas in 2005-2006, scored below the "competent" level required in English tests (IELTS band 6) for employment as professionals in Australia. This raised questions not only about how

international students with such poor English efficiency were able to gain entry to Australian university, but more importantly, how these students were able to progress through their course and pass university exams. In other words, how were these students assessed in their courses?¹

This paper presents a discussion of the preliminary findings from a study examining the factors influencing how lecturers assess the written work of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The paper reports on work still in progress and thus presents a snapshot only of a number of issues or common themes that have emerged from the first stage of a study conducted at a large research-intensive University in Australia. Data collected from questionnaires and interviews with teaching staff suggest that lecturers are influenced by a variety of factors when assessing written assignments and a large proportion of them assess ESL students' work differently to the work of Native-English speaking (NS) students.

It is neither possible nor desirable in a paper of this length to cover the many issues and themes that have emerged from the study. I will therefore focus on a number of issues or common themes that have come out of the data thus far in relation to these two subsidiary questions:

1. What are lecturers' beliefs about the importance of academic writing (and the various features of academic writing)?
2. Do these beliefs affect the way they assess the written work of ESL students? In other words, do lecturers assess ESL students' work differently to the work of NS students?

The assessment of ESL students' academic writing

The past few decades have seen an increase in the research on academic writing particularly in the context of teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) and World Englishes (WE) (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). This is partly in response to the growth of English not only as the international language of trade and commerce, but also as the leading language for the 'dissemination of academic knowledge' (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002:1). The general purpose of these studies has been to learn about the kinds of writing students are required to do, the writing problems ESL students have, and how writing is assessed by instructors or raters (Hamp-Lyons, 1991). Findings from these studies have informed the work of EAP teachers, curriculum developers, test-designers and university language support services (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992).

Most of the studies investigating lecturers' perceptions of ESL students' writing have taken a Needs Analysis approach and have focused on the 'deficiencies' or errors in the writing of the NNS students. Several studies have looked at lecturers' views on ESL students' writing or academic literacy skills (e.g. John, 1991; Jenkins et. al., 1993; Zhu, 2002), and other studies have examined lecturers' reactions to and tolerance of errors in grammar and English usage (eg. Santos, 1988; Janopoulos, 1992; Vann et.al., 1984,1991). For example, the lecturers interviewed in John's (1991) study identified several 'weaknesses' that contributed to 'academic illiteracy' including: limited

¹ While the focus of attention has been on international students, it is important to recognize that there is a growing number of 'domestic' university students in Australia for whom English is a second or additional language. A recent study at the University of Melbourne Law School revealed that almost half the students referred to language support after an in-class diagnostic writing test were classified as 'domestic' students (Larcombe & Malkin, *in press*). In this paper "ESL students" refer to both international and domestic students for whom English is a second or additional language.

disciplinary vocabulary, inability to provide relevant examples connected to the concepts; and lack of objectivity. Zhu (2002) also used interviews to ask lecturers what they thought of their NNS students' writing. She found that although lecturers placed more importance on content and accuracy of information, many of the 23 interviewees mentioned grammar and English usage as being problematic.

In addition to the studies that investigate lecturers' reactions to certain aspects of ESL students' compositions, there are studies that examine how readers/raters make decisions while evaluating ESL compositions (eg. Vaughan, 1991; Cumming et.al., 2002). Cumming et. al's (2002:69) study looks at the decisions that raters make while evaluating compositions (rather than the characteristics of the written texts that examinees produce). They did this by using asking participants to use 'think aloud' procedures to provide concurrent tape-recorded verbal reports of their decision making in rating ESL compositions.

Vaughan (1991) also uses think aloud protocol analysis in her study into 'what actually goes on in trained raters' minds when they are evaluating essays holistically. She asked raters, all from the same university system and experienced in holistic assessment, to read through and grade six essays. She chose two essays written by native English-speaking (NS) students, and four written by NNS representing 4 language backgrounds (Chinese, Hebrew, French, Spanish), all of whom had been in the United States for 3.5 to 6 years. The findings of her study concluded that despite their similar training, the raters had quite individual approaches to reading essays and that they focused on different essay elements. For example, 'handwriting' was mentioned as a problem by some raters while others looked favorably upon an essay because of its "unique use of an extended metaphor", not one of the guideline characteristics (Vaughan, 1991:121).

One of the issues that emerges in the literature on content lecturers' assessment of ESL students' writing is the concern that ESL/ NNS students are being assessed differently to NS students.

Sheehan (2002) reports findings from a survey of faculty at her tertiary institution in the United States which revealed that the majority of instructors were concerned about issues of equitable grading and meeting standards: While many of her colleagues stated that they assess the written work of NS and NNS with the 'same rigour, looking for error free prose that is structurally and grammatically correct', several commented that they generally scored the writing of NNS students 'less stringently' than the work of native writers of English (Sheehan, 2002:16). Some other instructors at her institution, commented that they would not correct any essays that 'demonstrate a general lack knowledge of standard written English and the ability to utilize it in assignments', regardless of the students' first-language background (p.16).

In Jenkins et. al's (1993) study on the role of writing and the evaluative practices of faculty in graduate engineering programs, 36% of staff responded that they used different standards when evaluating the writing of NS and NNS (Non-native English speaking) graduate students. When different standards were used, 25% of respondents indicated that it was most often the sentence level features such as grammar, vocabulary, punctuation and spelling that were evaluated more leniently. Almost as many respondents (21%) indicated that they did not use the same standards for the overall writing ability of NNS students, In other words, they used different, more lenient standards with 'discourse level features of writing' (Jenkins et. al. 1993:57).

These findings are supported by O'Hagan's (1999) study investigating possible differences in lecturers' treatment of NS and NNS writing. Findings from her study indicate that in general, the assessment criteria applied to NS and NNS essays are the same, but that 'marking schemes are commonly modified in some way for non-native speaker essays' (O'Hagan, 1999:37). In particular, O'Hagan concludes that lecturers tend to be more lenient on some assessment criteria for NNS essays – namely grammar, spelling and vocabulary – and sometimes for structure/organization as well. What is particularly interesting about O'Hagan's findings is her discussion of the conflict experienced by lecturers in dealing with the issue of same or different standards (O'Hagan, 1999:37). Her findings suggest that there may be a conflict between the lecturers' perceptions of how they should assess students' work – that is, using a common standard regardless of language background – and what they are really doing in practice (O'Hagan, 1999:37).

To add to the small body of existing research on the beliefs and practices of lecturers who respond to ESL students' writing from a discipline-specific (rather than language) perspective (O'Hagan 1999), my study aimed to examine the factors influencing lecturers' assessment of ESL students' academic writing. My study thus aimed to explore the central question: How do lecturers assess the academic writing of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds?

As mentioned previously, this paper focuses on the questions:

- What are lecturers' beliefs about the importance of academic writing (and the various features of academic writing)?
- Do these beliefs affect the way they assess the written work of ESL students? In other words, do lecturers assess ESL students' work differently to the work of NS students?

The study was undertaken at a large research-intensive university in Australia with a total student population of around 42,000. International students account for approximately 26% of this total, and most come from countries where English is not the first language. These students together with the increasing number of domestic ESL students make up a significant proportion – at least one third – of the student cohort at the University.

Method

The study was carried out in two stages. In the first stage of data collection, lecturers were asked to complete a short questionnaire which was distributed by email. Results from this stage enabled me to reformulate and refine questions for the semi-structured interviews with lecturers. The interviews took an average of 30 minutes and were audio-taped.

Before questionnaires were distributed, a pilot study was conducted to ensure that the questionnaire items were clear and unambiguous. Twenty-nine lecturers participated in the pilot study and provided feedback on various aspects of the questionnaire. The feedback suggested that the question items were clear and unambiguous. From the data obtained from the pilot, interview questions were developed and these were trialled with five lecturers. Themes and issues emerging from both the pilot questionnaires and interviews informed the main study.

Stage 1: Questionnaires

In late 2007 and early 2008, questionnaires were sent by email to approximately 400 academic staff² using staff lists available on faculty websites. I targeted a range of disciplines in faculties with a high proportion of international ESL students.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section asked for demographic information including age group, years of experience, disciplinary background, language background and other languages spoken. The second section consisted of approximately 20 question items including structured single-indicator items (yes/no/sometimes) with items asking respondents to “please explain” their responses; structured multi-indicator items and open-ended questions.

Lecturers were also asked to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a short confidential interview. Once the completed questionnaires were returned, data were coded and collated using SPSS.

In total, 106 lecturers returned completed questionnaires either by email or internal mailing system. Participants reflected the diversity in the staff at the university as they varied in disciplinary backgrounds, age, years of teaching experience and academic positions. Females accounted for 39.6% of respondents, males 58.5% and two people did not respond to this question³. Approximately 15% of respondents indicated that English was not their first language.

Stage 2: interviews

For the second stage of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 lecturers from various disciplines and who had varying levels of experience. On average, interviews lasted between 25-30minutes and questions focused on exploring how lecturers assessed students’ work and the factors that influenced or affected their decisions and practices. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Analysis is currently being undertaken using NVivo – software specifically designed for qualitative analysis.

Perceived importance of academic writing skills

Generally, lecturers believe writing skills to be very important. When asked to indicate how important writing skills are in their subject/course on a 4-point scale, 95.3% of the lecturers indicated that writing skills are very important or somewhat important in their course, and only 1 person responded that writing skills are not important at all.

Lecturers’ perceptions of the importance of writing skills varied depending on a number of factors including disciplinary background and years of experience. 100% of respondents from the Arts/Humanities disciplines indicated that writing skills were very important (95.3%) or somewhat important (4.7%). This is in contrast to 36 % of Engineering lecturers and 37.5% of Commerce/Business lecturers believing that writing skills were very important.

Similarly, there was a slight difference in lecturers’ responses depending on their years

² In response to my courtesy emails to heads of departments, two heads of department offered to distribute the questionnaires internally using departmental staff email lists. Hence, I do not know the exact number of questionnaires distributed in these departments.

³ This male/female ratio in this study is reflective of the University’s total teaching staff of which approximately 37% are female.

of experience. Less than half (45.8%) of the respondents with 20 or more years indicated that writing skills were very important compared to 75% of lecturers with 10-19 years experience and 72.1% with less than 10 years experience indicating that writing skills were very important. As mentioned previously, each of the discipline groups in my study was represented quite evenly by staff with 2-30 years of teaching experience.

These findings suggest that lecturers' disciplinary background and years of experience are two possible factors that influence lecturers' beliefs about academic writing and hence their assessment of writing. This is the conclusion reached by several researchers in the U.S. (e.g. Vann, Lorenz and Meyer, 1984; Janopoulos, 1992; Cumming, Kantor & Power, 2002), who state that lecturers' assessment practices depended on their disciplinary background and other variables (e.g. sex, age or teaching experience).

What is the most important feature of academic writing?

Lecturers were also asked to indicate how important various features of academic writing were. They were also asked to the open-ended question: what is the most important feature of academic writing? Their responses were coded and analysed and the five most frequent responses were as follows:

1. Logical structure of ideas (39 responses)
2. Critical thinking/analysis (34)
3. Demonstrating understanding of content/concepts (28)
4. Clarity of expression (24)
5. Quality of argument (19)

Other responses included evidence of research, originality, correct use of sources, grammar/sentences, and addressing specific question. One lecturer wrote "punctuation" as the most important feature of academic writing and another lecturer stated that "not plagiarizing" was most important.

How is written expression assessed?

In terms of lecturers' practice in assessing and marking written assignments, 50.9% of them stated that they allocated marks - generally between 5-20% of the total marks - to written expression. A smaller proportion (24.5%) indicated that they sometimes allocated marks, mostly depending on the type of assessment task. Although 24.5% of respondents indicated that they did not allocate marks specifically for expression, a number of them commented that written expression affected the assessment indirectly or implicitly:

I don't allocate separate marks, the allocation is not quantified numerically, but the written expression is a highly significant qualitative consideration in assessment

[Expression] implicitly affects ability to demonstrate knowledge & understanding of the issues raised by the topic

No formal allocation, however a requirement of a high level of linguistic complexity is implicit.

Other lecturers mentioned that while they did not allocate marks specifically for written expression, they deducted marks for poor expression.

[No,] not specifically for written expression, but marks will be lost if I cannot interpret what they have written.

I do not explicitly allocate marks for written expression, but well-expressed assignments and essays influence the final mark (and the reverse - poor expression and grammar is

likely to obscure the argument being made, and hence detract from the final mark).

The assessment practice of some lecturers seemed to be influenced by who they thought the students were – that is, whether they thought students were ESL students or not.

I try to avoid factoring it into marking for those who appear to struggle with English – although I do comment on ability where necessary. [S]

If a student does not have English as their first language, I will take that into account and make comments about their expression but not deduct any marks.

These comments raise the question of whether lecturers assess the written work of ESL students with the same criteria or standards as they do for that of native English speaking students. It also raises the question of how lecturers identify whether a student is an ESL student or not. Although this second question was addressed in the second stage of my study, I do not examine it in detail here.

Same or different assessment standards?

Lecturers were asked to indicate whether they applied the same standards in assessing the work of ESL and NS students, and they were asked to explain their responses. Approximately 68% of lecturers indicated that they applied the same standards and 19.8% stated that they “sometimes” did. What was interesting about the comments made by these lecturers was their view about what assessing with the “same standards” meant.

A significant number of lecturers (more than 20%) who indicated that they applied the same standards when assessing student’s work then went on to comment that they gave special consideration to ESL students when it came to grammar and expression. A few examples of comments include:

Yes, however I am more lenient as regards grammar, punctuation and spelling.

I make some allowance for students whose first language is clearly not English. For example, while I would expect to see the same structure and flow of ideas, I would make allowances for the language (Vocab, spelling and punctuation)

Yes, but I take into account the fact that some ESL students cannot express themselves as clearly in English as local students.

Other lecturers commented on the tension between what they believe they should be doing and what they actually ended up doing.

I try to but I realize I cannot really do that all the time

I try to but is hard. More than half of my students are ESL students

These are consistent with comments made by lecturers in O’Hagan’s (1999) study in Australia and Jenkin et al’s study of Engineering lecturers in a North American university (1993:57).

Discussion

A number of important issues and questions emerge from an analysis of the findings presented above. The first has to do with the issue of reliability. Reliability is generally considered to be ‘a crucial function of robust assessment’ (Knight 2002:276). It refers to the consistency in marking by individual lecturers as well as consistency between lecturers for a piece of work.

Clearly, individual lecturers make subjective judgments when assessing students' written work and this raises questions about the reliability of assessment procedures. Even when lecturers are working with predetermined assessment criteria, they admit to exercising 'flexibility' in applying these criteria depending on the background of the student:

I apply the same criteria, but I take ESL into consideration as I apply these criteria.

When assessing a student for whom English is clearly a second language, I will often use my discretion

This also raises questions about the existence of bias in the mind of the lecturer. Fleming (1999) provides an overview of the types of biases in marking students' written work, and states that one possible source of bias is the halo effect – that is, bias from knowledge of the student.

Many lecturers in my study commented that they are aware of their ESL students when grading students' written work and this affected how they assessed the work:

In terms of grammar, I'd be much more lenient for the ESL students. If somebody whose English as a first language is using that level of poor grammar I'd just be really annoyed at how poorly they edited their work, and consider it to be a really poor representation of their standard, whereas I would see if it was an ESL student... I might also understand that they're trying to grasp things that are on different levels.

I may take into account an ESL student's background when it comes to minor mistakes (which I would not easily forgive in a native speaker's written work).

Even when written work was only identified by a student number – as opposed to being identified by students' names - some lecturers admitted to making assumptions and judgments that they were produced by ESL students based on the types of errors they had made. This then affected the way they assessed the student's work:

Student's work is submitted by student number – the cultural and language background of the student is not discernible from the work submitted. However, if it appears that a student is ESL and has had difficulty expressing concepts in English, I will be generous with my marking for content.

I do make allowances for ESL students – with the qualification that it is not always possible to judge upfront who is an ESL student and who isn't.

One lecturer added how surprised he had been when his initial assumptions about the language background of a student were proven wrong.

It surprised us when the language has been so poor that we naturally assumed that it was an overseas student and talked to the tutor ... but the tutor said 'but that's a local student'.

In addition to reliability and bias, another issue emerging from the study is equity and the question: What is equitable when assessing the work of ESL students?

A number of lecturers mentioned the issue of equity in relation to the equal treatment of ESL and NS students' work:

Students applying for courses in English should have sufficient command of the language and not be treated any differently to other students, otherwise it becomes an equity issue.

Cannot change the goalposts, as not fair to Australian students who might have gone to poor schools or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In contrast, one lecturer thought it was unfair to apply the same standards when assessing ESL students' work in the early stages of a course:

Native English speakers have a distinct advantage, which must be taken into consideration when marking first and second assignments.

This view supports Dyke's argument (1998, cited in Leathwood, 2005:317) that there may be equity issues when assessment practices penalize different writing styles when the assessment is 'theoretically assessing not a student's use of standard English, but specific discipline-related knowledge or skills.'

Conclusion

The study discussed in this paper examined the beliefs and assessment practices of lecturers in one research-intensive university in Australia, so the findings are of course, limited in scope and generalisability. The preliminary findings from my study however, shed some light on the complex issues concerning the assessment of ESL student's academic writing.

It is clear that there are tensions and conflicts between what lecturers believe about their assessment of ESL students' written work and how they actually go about the work of grading and marking students' work. Lecturers are influenced by a range of factors in assessing writing, and their evaluation of students' work is, in the end, a highly subjective and somewhat fluid process. This raises important (and complex) questions about the reliability and validity of the assessment procedure. As stated above, reliability is 'a crucial function of robust assessment' (Knight 2002:276), and those involved in designing and grading written assessment tasks should do what they can to improve inter- and intra- marker reliability. This is an important issue considering that academic grades/marks can have a significant effect on students' future employment and (postgraduate) study options.

In recognizing that assessment is a 'socially situated interpretive act' (Shay, 2005) however, I am not arguing here that our aim should be objectivity at all costs – that would be neither possible nor desirable. What I am arguing for is the development of institutional and departmental policies or guidelines that assist lecturers in assessing the work of all students as equitably and reliably as possible given the objectives and nature of particular subjects.

As one lecturer in my study stated:

This is inevitably a subjective process, and I have long been concerned about the lack of clearer guidelines from the university as to the most appropriate approach to take in marking the work of ESL students. Given the number of such students, I see this as a major shortcoming in undergraduate teaching here.

This is an important issue if universities are to ensure that their ESL students are neither disadvantaged by the assessment procedure, nor unfairly 'advantaged' by being marked under a different (less rigorous) set of standards (Janopolous, 1992).

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