Using Literature as Space to Navigate Cognition in Second Language Acquisition :
Intentions, Successes, Challenges, and Reconceptualization of the Course

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Abstract

This paper reviews a recent English course where literature was used for Second Language Acquisition (SLA) of academic discourse skills. Language learners (LLs) in a required English course, whose primary area of study is not English, can exhibit a wide range of proficiency levels when entering the acquisition process. This leads to specific challenges in delivering a course that is pragmatically useful and accessible to all learners. This review will first summarize the intentions of the approach, before highlighting the successes. The paper will then go over some of the challenges that were met, followed by a speculation into their reasons with possible improvements on future course design and delivery.

Key words : interactional competence, multilingual, course design, successes, challenges

Personal Statement

If I were to promptly decide which academic communication skills are most valuable in the SLA of academic discourse skills, I would choose the understanding of the language structure, a solid grasp of the language style, and a sense of how to organize ideas in a logical direction. These three aspects of academic communication—structure, style, and direction—can only be ascertained if we understand that there is a shared space to position our cognitive choices within. Language acquisition, then, requires a LL to not only see themselves in the language they are learning, but also to know where they are within the interactive communicative space. Language is not only a tool to make private thoughts public and visible (Carsten, & Dai, 2021), but it serves to answer questions related to navigation, as stated by Hutchins, "Given that we are where we are, where shall we proceed in a particular way for a particular time?" (Hutchins, 1995). For this purpose, for this shared space which we can navigate within, to and from, communication becomes the interactive continuum of turn taking and repositioning of cognition and literature becomes the tool to provide such a shared space.

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（受理：2023年10月 6 日）

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Introduction

In this research paper I will review my personal approach to using literature as a space for navigation as cognition (Hutchins, 1995) and illustrate the importance of structure, style, and direction in academic communication. It will review the course scopes to activate improved SLA; it will highlight some clear successes as to the choices made in course delivery and reveal where the course implementation was unable to equally meet the wider range of English proficiency levels of these LLs. In the final section of the paper, I will look at some of the responsive modifications taking place with my current cohort of LLs to help reduce the range of English proficiency levels moving forward, which in turn will prompt a future discussion of how we might expand our realm of assessment to make use of a more up to date socially contextualized definition of language (Salaberry & Burch, 2021).

Scopes

The primary aim of this course was to build a productive English discourse around text analysis. To reveal from the text, elements of theme, character, action, and setting, a variety of related lectures on these topics, as well as online practice were provided. In class LLs were asked to work in groups organized by theme, and to formulate their individual academic discourse skills, involving structure, style, and direction. LLs were asked to work on a different theme related open-response question or prompt each day and find evidence in the text to support their opinions. Working in groups allowed them to provide one another with the support they needed when interacting in a multilingual fashion, which allowed them to better analyze the text closely and find the information they were looking for.

As the background, in the previous course delivered at the same level, the learners were allowed to choose their own text. It was not a bad practice until the limitations began to emerge when the wider range of theme, character, and setting derailed most of the attempts to share an experience of close analysis. This in turn provided little opportunity for group work and in-depth class discussion. The result was a high rate of isolated students, relying on translations over the useful actual language interaction and practice.

To mitigate the lack of choice of text, a graded reader of Goerge Orwell 1984 was chosen, as it provided a wide variety of accessible themes that could potentially suit the varying interests of the students. Themes such as information control, personal freedom, community pressure, personal relationships, love, death, rebellion, coercion, surveillance, and many more are a part of the book. Using these themes, my goal was to provide the students with a self-reflexive class exploration so that they could build personal connections with those themes, as well as with one another, thus providing a content loaded space to interact multilingually and share in the experience of interacting in academic English.

At the beginning of the course, I made online grammar reviews available. Those offered a scaffolded practice of the grammar structures, intended for the students to practice on their own time. For most of the course, as the students worked on open-response worksheets, where they responded to writing prompts around the text elements of theme, character, and setting; they were asked to choose from those elements a research direction and utilize the academic discourse skills of structure, style, and direction to form written responses to the daily prompts. As they worked, we exchanged ideas both within the class and individually. Guidance was always available to them, and the blackboard was used for any larger ideas, questions, or problems they encountered.

Targeted Successes and Challenges

Did choosing one book have a positive effect on the practice? The research confirms that denying the choice of a text to the group provided the shared space, where they could work together on exchanging different ideas related to one text. They worked in small groups, editing each other's answers, using the text together. They were asked to work together but use different lines from the text to complete their work. Yet occasionally, usually the same specific students, would write the same thing, with minimal attention to providing fully formed sentences. Unfortunately, a good many of the students seem to have failed to read past the first five pages. For these students, I chose a less complex level of understanding of the text requirements and doubled down on looking for content in the text to respond better to the daily prompt.

Did the students benefit from the written practice? A good number of students showed an increased level of achievement in writing. There had been a considerable difference in the structure of their sentences over the weeks; many students were excited to be able to see their formal language style improving, proving that their literacy changed in a positive way during the course. The content scope of their ideas also improved. With each week passing by, there was a functional repetition and experimentation apparent in their responses; there was certainly an increase in the proper use of the discourse markers, conjunctions, and vocabulary. The ability to create written discourse involving evidence and personal opinions was also improved.

Did the open-response worksheets assist in developing text analysys skills? The student response was varied. Many students were still at the stage of approaching the activity using translation methods. Although I provided time to students to ask questions and showed many examples, for some students, it was still quite difficult to connect with the process of reading a text to gather information about theme, character, and setting. It is difficult to conclude whether this was the evidence of inability or disinterest.

Did the students build personal connections with one another around the themes of the text? Yes, students were seen both in class and around the campus reading and talking together

actively using the text. I can assume that they were reading and translating it from the target language, exchanging information, and assisting one another in a multitude of ways. However, were they discussing and building personal connections with a theme, using English; it seems this would be unlikely outside of the class as unless they were responding formally to the questions I posed in class, or sharing their written work with the class, they mainly spoke about the text in Japanese during the class.

Did the course build a productive English discourse around theme, character, and setting? A majority of the students were able to express their opinions on those elements of the text with relative comfort. The end of course assessment including eight questions conducted as an interview; it was conducted by most of the groups to completion. Individual grading was done on the spot. A small number of students did not perform well enough to earn the final grades for the course; however, this does not indicate their inability to write in a formal way but rather their lack of confidence and ability to recall their work vocally.

Discussions and Conclusions

So, why does this troubling state of proficiency persist, and what actions can be taken with beginner language learners to rectify this problem? One method I have already used is choosing a textbook that effectively provides students with an iterative, or scaffolded, experience of the skills they need to acquire and use for their higher education research. The text chosen is the BBC Speak Out 3 rd edition B1 published in 2022 by Pearson Education Limited. There are clear set goals that align with the elements of the close analysis they are expected to practice in the course. Through this text, the students should be able to not only familiarize themselves with the academic elements of structure, style, and direction, but use these new tools while they shift their focus from reading and comprehension, and to the interactive communication required in the next course.

Let us ask this question though, when a student's success is seen only in their ability to adeptly practice written communication, if they still find true interaction with peers difficult, have we succeeded? Again, language is not only a tool to make private thoughts public and visible (Roever & Dai, 2021), but it serves to provide a style of ephemeral navigation, socially speaking, and discussing ideas of where we are, where shall we proceed, and in what way shall we proceed (Hutchins, 1995). Authoring one's internal thoughts is a creative act of language and an act of navigation in that language (Hutchins, 1995) Should we not try as hard as we can to foster this ability in the language learners? What classroom tasks and assessments can we develop, which would move us away from mere performance and elicitation and move us toward an alignment with the tenants of interactive competence?

In the last 30 years, the definition of language has moved, and we need to move with it. Moreover, our current testing models are unable to assess a definition of language that includes

elements of turn taking, sequence, preference organization, repair, and non-verbal elements. Thus, my final question is whether we are effectively capable of adapting to this new socially contextualized definition of language (Salaberry & Burch, 2021) and would this adaptation provide a greater service to our students.

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