Language and academic skills advising in the era of internationalisation: A multiliteracies perspective

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Abstract: This paper explores the application of the notion of 'multiliteracies' (New London Group, 1996, 2000), widely used at primary school level, in the internationalised higher education context. The concept of multiliteracies extends the definition of text and literacy to account for both the proliferation of non-standard versions of English and the increasing multimodality of texts which commonly incorporate designs of meanings beyond the purely linguistic. A multiliterate concept of text privileges no mode of representation of meanings, no particular text-type and no idealised version of English thus offering a model of equitable access and opportunity of success to students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds as well as other traditionally disadvantaged students. Furthermore, a multiliteracies model fosters an educational environment where students from any cultural background, including local students, can benefit from the interaction with others as multiple literacies become valued in class and assessment tasks. The role of LAS advisers within this model, both as teachers and as participants in the higher education community, is discussed. It is argued that a pedagogy of multiliteracies can inform LAS teaching practice if a position critical of dominant academic discourses is adopted. The paper further suggests that LAS advisers are uniquely positioned to promote and support a change towards multiliteracies within the broader academic community of students and staff.

Key words: multiliteracies, internationalisation, inclusive practices

Introduction

Language and academic skills (LAS) advisers are regularly consulted by university students who may be experiencing difficulties with their course assignments or practical placements. In particular, students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) seek specialist support in managing a number of issues related to language and cultural differences which impact negatively on the progress of their studies. LAS advisers'

responses to these issues often focus on the planning and implementation of workshops to support this particular cohort of students and on offering individual tutorials where the students can work intensively with advisers on their assignments. According to students and lecturers, this response is highly effective as it makes the expectations of a subject, the assessment requirements and the academic conventions, explicit to the students. However, all too often the fast pace of our work and the demanding requests of students to obtain the *know-how* of assignment writing can make our work uncritical and make us overly prescriptive of the text-types used in academia. A prescriptive approach sanctions the reproduction of accepted conventions without contestation and, while it may deliver a good result for the student in the short term, it does not foster a deep understanding of the relationships and structures of power which gave rise to those conventions in the first place; it does not encourage in the student the development of a critical inquiring mind as it is intended in university.

A prescriptive reproductive approach is essentially assimilationist in that particular groups of students, such as NESB, are instructed to recognise, accept, and ultimately embrace as valid and natural the practices of the dominant group, in this case, the Western academic discourse community. This process of assimilation and acculturation (Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003) may be disregarding of the practices of the minority and disadvantaged groups, silencing the students for whom the process was initially conceived and put into practice. Thus, such a process may unwittingly result in the alienation of these minority groups, including a particular group of students that Australian universities are striving to attract: the international student cohort. Furthermore, acculturation of the minorities does not take into account that those who belong to the majority groups may also need 'support' to function successfully in a context where they do not constitute a majority, a context of *difference*, as it may occur in the future in the Australian internationalised university and more generally in the increasingly globalised workplace or even the culturally diversified Australian social environment.

This paper argues that inclusive teaching practices that embrace difference are needed, as opposed to assimilationist approaches (Gale & Densmore, 2000), in order to sustain a truly internationalised university. It proposes that the adoption of a pedagogy of *multiliteracies* (New London Group, 1996, 2000) in the university context encompasses such practices. The paper further discusses the impact of a *multiliteracies* framework on the work of LAS advisers and units, and suggests that LAS advisers, located strategically in the continuum between faculty academics and students, are uniquely positioned to promote and support a change towards *multiliteracies*. It concludes that the application of a *multiliteracies* approach to LAS teaching requires a strong commitment to critical reflective practice.

Current situation in higher education

Language is the system of representation of meanings most valued in Western academic contexts, be it in written or oral mode. Other semiotic systems, such as the visual, are considered essential complements of the linguistic modes but do not command by themselves the same degree of respect and acceptance as valid ways of expressing arguments, positions or facts. They are generally used in a secondary manner in terms of logic and design. For example, the logic of visual discourse is commonly presented

as subordinate to the linear logic of writing or speech (Kress, 2003), as is the case in the delivery of an oral presentation enhanced by visual aids.

Within the language realm, in turn, the written mode is privileged over the oral, perhaps for its inherent ability to sustain an argument over time. In many university courses, writing is given a particularly pre-eminent position and, especially, essay writing is elevated to constitute perhaps the most valued communication skill that university students should develop during their tertiary courses. However, depending on their chosen profession, many graduates will use their writing skills only minimally at the workplace (for instance, nurses, doctors, accountants, paramedics) and it is quite unlikely that their writing will ever take the shape of an essay. Other skills may be more important for employment but are not always given the place they deserve in tertiary courses. For example, Crosling and Ward (1999, 2002) have found that oral skills in undergraduate business courses at Monash University are underestimated in the curriculum, in terms of development and assessment, when compared to the future demands of graduate employment. Information literacy skills, that is, the skills to thoroughly and accurately search and locate information, have also been identified by most universities to constitute essential abilities their graduates should develop (The Australian National University, 2004).

The overvaluation of the linguistic above other semiotic systems at university assumes students' mastery of the English language, its contexts of use, its discourses and associated values. It presupposes that students behave, believe, value and act according to an idealised norm largely based on Western academic discourses. In the existing language-based university culture, although it is recognised that a student might not fit this 'fictional learner construct' (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 118), there are no provisions to accommodate students' difference other than silencing the students by facilitating their acculturation to the norms of the majority – as if these norms represented the only *correct* ones – or even punishing them to reinforce the norms' correctness. This educational approach thus resonates with the poststructuralist notion of *othering* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998; Pennycook, 1994; Said, 1978) that equates difference with wrongness. It classifies the students in binary terms: either they perform in the *target* way using the *target* language and text-type (and become part of *us)* or they do not (and become part of the *others*).

Most of our international students and local students whose first language is not English have come from an environment where the academic culture, as it is conceived in the West and embedded in our idealised student construct, is not necessarily valued. The culture of inquiry, argumentation and debate; the practice of questioning and articulating doubts over what other people say or think, particularly over those in a position of authority such as writers of books or scholarly papers; and the rather direct approach to writing may not be considered proper practices, for instance, in societies of Confucian heritage. Likewise, a student, in being an apprentice, may not be expected to write or orally express openly their position and thoughts on a given issue (Handa, 2004). Therefore, if universities are committed to the internationalisation of their student ranks, the pedagogies employed today need to be changed and become inclusive of the diversity of all students' practices, values and beliefs (Battersby, 2002; Burbules & Torres, 2000; Kalantzis & Cope, 2001).

The concept of *multiliteracies*

The term *multiliteracies* was first coined by the New London Group (1996) mainly in relation to language and literacy teaching in the primary school context. The New London Group's (1996, 2000) model uses the word *multiliteracies* in a dual sense. On the one hand, the term refers to the ability to construct and understand meanings expressed not only by language but also by the integration of linguistic elements with a range of other designs of meaning, namely, visual, audio, gestural, spatial as well as multimodal combinations. On the other hand, the word *multiliteracies* refers to the ability to create and negotiate texts in diverse forms of the English language, including its intersections with other languages, thus acknowledging that varieties of English do exist and that no variety is superior to another. Indeed, English has become a *lingua mundi* and a *lingua franca* being widely used today all over the world and in multiple realms (Pennycook, 1994). In its spread, English has fragmented in a myriad of varieties responsive to geographic as well as specific discourse communities. The *multiliteracies* model (New London Group, 1996, 2000), in taking these aspects into account, does not raise one form of English over another. Furthermore, it does not raise language over other systems of representation of meanings.

A *multiliteracies* pedagogy appreciates the value of difference by extending the traditional concepts of text and literacy to include meanings constructed in a range of semiotic systems. Students' skills and knowledge *albeit* expressed in ways different from the linguistic, with a different logic and grammar, have a place and obtain recognition as fully valid means of expression, not just as complementary to language. In this way, a model of *multiliteracies* moves away from the binary dichotomy of *us* and *others* that privileges a standardised written form, rewards the students who perform as per prescribed norm, and punishes those who are different. In valuing all modes of representation of meaning, this pedagogy encompasses a broad dimension of communication and underpins a model of inclusion. It is in this sense that the model suits the internationalised higher education context.

The role of LAS advisers and centres

The adoption of a *multiliteracies* approach can face resistance from all sectors of the academic community. It demands accepting a change, which not all would realise is necessary. For this change to occur it is essential that LAS advisers understand the notion of *multiliteracies* and actively promote it. As Clerehan, Orsmond, and Wilson (2001) have stated:

> Learning Centres are at the centre – even the epicentre – of changes in learning. We are in a unique position in that, from our anthropological bird's eye-view, we are able to detect shifts sometimes before those embedded in their disciplines do; and this must mean that we can act to facilitate change where we see the need. (p. 7)

As a first step, LAS advisers would have to raise awareness and promote understanding of the need for such a change as a move to ensure that internationalisation involves more than just income for the institutions. While universities have certainly realised the

potential of internationalisation as an educational project beyond the obvious financial rewards, many of the guidelines developed by policy-makers to support staff in the process of internationalisation present international topics and perspectives in course design and delivery as discrete contributions to be added to the core components. This approach strongly marks the boundaries between core and additions, and ensures that the Western modalities, themes and norms remain invulnerable as the centre of a course. A framework of *multiliteracies*, in construing literacy as the ability to produce and negotiate texts from multiple channels and multiple cultural positions, relativises the Western norm and incorporates a critical perspective which enriches the academic debate and leads to an overall better education. A pedagogy of *multiliteracies,* in contrast to tokenistic approaches, blends the additions with the core to redefine the mainstream.

The fear of change among academics would need to be addressed. This is a task that could also engage LAS advisers, who are in position to explain that traditional approaches to teaching and learning are not replaced or disregarded but instead are supplemented by *multiliteracies* (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000) in order to accommodate variations relating to culture in particular and to other more general factors, such as individual students' learning styles or the existence of disabilities.

At an operational level, the implementation of a *multiliteracies* pedagogy would redefine the role of LAS units, as the emphasis would not be placed on language but on a range of semiotic systems. The model requires the integration into the same organisational unit of traditional English language and academic skills advisers and staff with skills in other areas. In fact, professionals in areas such as instructional design, Web development, audio visual production and IT, as well as maths and visual arts, are often employed in the same support division as LAS advisers, and available to academic staff for consultancy services. But what is proposed here is for professionals with knowledge and sound understanding of the logic and grammar of other semiotic systems to be included as LAS advisers, where the L would stand for *languages* accordingly extending the concept of language beyond the purely linguistic system. Professional development programs to facilitate the acquisition and development of teaching skills for these new advisers and of familiarisation with alternative media for traditional advisers would have to be implemented and team work would be most important.

In support of the above idea, Craswell and Bartlett (2002) hold the view that the range of academic backgrounds and skills found among LAS advisers has only been beneficial to the provision of a better service to students at The Australian National University. They even argue that the diverse backgrounds of staff working together in LAS units over the years have positioned the LAS community 'somewhat ahead of its time' (p.10) in embracing multidisciplinary teamwork for the development of scholarship.

Implementation of a multiliteracies pedagogy: Examples and reflections

The double meaning given to the word *multiliteracies* opens a range of possibilities for the interpretation of what *multiliteracies* are and how a pedagogy of *multiliteracies* can be realised. It has been reported (Lankshear, Green, & Snyder, 2000) that for some teachers, *multiliteracies* are accomplished when the traditional print forms are replaced

by other media reflecting, as a result, current technological advances and providing choice and flexibility to their students. This is a common interpretation in the higher education context where, even in on-campus courses, communication via WebCT or similar platforms can overtake most other ways of communication between students and lecturers (and university administrative staff), including class discussions, clarification of assessment tasks and submission of assignments. However, as Kalantzis and Cope (2000) explain, this technology is not equally embraced by all students; some are actually put at a disadvantage precisely by its use and feel excluded as a result.

This is a situation increasingly experienced by international students. While they are generally quite proficient in the use of basic computer skills, many students need to overcome significant cultural barriers to approach their lecturers online and participate effectively in an electronically-based course. Moreover, international students often feel deceived on arriving in Australia and finding themselves visibly abandoned to their own resources in this type of courses, aggravated by the fact that appointments with the lecturers are not readily available. Because the nature of LAS work places advisers side by side with the students at the receiving end of this pedagogy and exposes us to the weaknesses of such an approach, it becomes our responsibility to act consequently and educate academics that *multiliteracies* involve more than replacing traditional print and face-to-face forms by electronically mediated ones. It is also our task to advocate on behalf of the students for the provision of truly flexible, multimodal ways of communication. Just teaching students how to approach and manage computer-based communication is not enough; it only endorses the shortcomings of the teaching approach and fosters a pattern of inequality of access to educational opportunities.

A more positive example where *multiliteracies* are associated with new technologies and flexibility has been reported by Ogilvie and Ryan (2004) in the assessment of a project in two marketing subjects. The students were given the option of delivering the project orally or through the production of a video or DVD. A great number of students took the visual option and expressed the view that being given a choice as well as the opportunity to showcase their abilities had raised their self-esteem and had increased their engagement with the course. Similar positive outcomes have been reported with different cohorts of students at post-secondary level of education in different contexts, such as Asian students in intensive ESL courses in Australia (Abu-Arab, 2005); Aboriginal students learning digital text technology (Doherty, 2002); tertiary students in South Africa developing information literacy skills (de Jager & Nassimbeni, 2002); and Australian nursing students developing oral competence for clinical placements (Hussin, 2002).

A case relevant to LAS professional practice where a *multiliteracies* approach has been implemented successfully for several years is described by Hunter and Morgan (2001). It concerns a university-level academic English credit-bearing unit for first and second year students in a Canadian polytechnic institute. The lecturers embrace the concept of *multiliteracies* in its full dimension. From the perspective of developing literacy in diverse media technologies, Hunter and Morgan (2001) expose their students to a range of multimodal texts, such as traditional print, spoken texts in public events, television films and advertising, print advertising and Web sites. They also explicitly teach their students a metalanguage to talk about these multimodal texts by discussing matters relating to the choice of images, shapes, colours and words. The introduction of a metalanguage highlights that multimodal texts respond to a logic of organisation different from that of

pure written texts and therefore need to be described by an adequate functional grammar. Students' achievement is finally assessed through two multimodal assignments: a group panel presentation and a multimedia research paper for which students receive explicit training on database searching as well as explicit teaching of academic discourse conventions.

For developing their students' ability to negotiate multiple languages and multiple forms of English and their associated discourses, the lecturers (Hunter & Morgan, 2001) maximise opportunities of interaction among the students in the class to enrich the discussions with fresh and varied perspectives. These interaction instances are fostered by the lecturers' welcoming attitude to diverse cultural interpretations inevitably enhanced and coloured by students' access to non-academic channels of information, such as texts in their own languages or widespread popular culture-specific beliefs.

The examples presented so far suggest that an approach to *multiliteracies* is an approach to equity and fairness which provides access not just to university but also to success at university. For this success to occur it is important that lecturers appreciate their international students for who they are and what they have to offer in the broad realm of knowledge and skills as opposed to focusing on who these students are not (Australians from Anglo-Celtic background) and the ability in English they have not by virtue of coming from a country of non-English speaking background.

The reconceptualisation of international students and their abilities as valuable resources for student learning that a pedagogy of *multiliteracies* can foster, should transpire both in the enrichment of class discussions (in line with academics' aspirations) and in the design of 'culturally responsive assessment' (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003, p. 135). This type of assessment task entails flexibility, choice of media, and selection of topics relevant to students' interests and cultures (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003), and therefore has the potential to benefit all students, international and local. This benefit needs to be clearly perceived by the totality of the student populace as well as the staff for the internationalisation of universities to become more than a mere income-generating exercise by administrators and international recruiters, which despite creating employment opportunities and useful services, gives rise to resentment from those affected (see Schapper & Mayson, 2004, for a staff perspective on this issue).

A question that remains to be answered, which was raised by Craswell and Bartlett (2002), relates to whether it is possible for an LAS pedagogy to be framed within the *multiliteracies* approach even in one-to-one sessions. In agreement with the authors' view, this paper argues that it is possible. But it contends that the success of such a pedagogy ultimately depends on how LAS advisers, as a group and individually, see themselves operating in the academic community. The applicability of a *multiliteracies* pedagogy and its success depend on whether advisers resist the dichotomising discourses of content versus skills fabricated by the dominant forces in academia, or accept instead to act as their gatekeepers.

This paper further suggests that a perspective of *multiliteracies* in language and academic skills advising should place a strong emphasis on the 'critical framing' stage (New London Group, 2000, p. 247) of literacy development. It should particularly aim to facilitate and develop international students' understanding and critique of the dominant discourses

– both in their countries of origin and in the West – that have led them to seek a Western education and that will place them in a position of privilege over others on return to their home countries with their well-earned degree. Neither time or institutional limitations nor our own position of privilege in Australian society should preclude our responsibility as educators to encourage reflection and promote change for the transformation of society and of the individual.

Conclusion

It has been argued that a *multiliteracies* approach to teaching, learning and 'being' at university can provide an inclusive framework for internationalising the university thus moving internationalisation away from tokenistic approaches and simplified assimilationist initiatives that only exacerbate the gap they purport to bridge. LAS advisers' unique position in the university structure situates them as key players in facilitating the adoption of a *multiliteracies* approach and, further, confers upon them an undeniable responsibility to act as agents of change in the broad academic community of lecturers and students. The opportunity for LAS advisers to successfully endorse a *multiliteracies* perspective in their own teaching depends on their commitment to adopt a critical hybrid position consistent with the promotion of reflection as a pillar of transformative education.

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