IS THE UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION A BRIDGE TO POSTGRADUATE WORK? AN INVESTIGATION AMONG B.A. STUDENTS WRITING FINAL YEAR DISSERTATIONS IN A MULTI-LINGUAL UNIVERSITY IN LONDON

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The competences which feature in the Bologna 'tuning' process include skills related to increasingly independent study at the end of the First Cycle which foreshadow postgraduate writing. In the UK the Undergraduate Dissertation is frequently the site for acquiring these.

I report on the challenges of the Dissertation in a BA English Language Studies Degree (BA ELS) in a university in London which attracts more than 50% of students for whom English is a second language. I identify interventions to help students meet the challenges of the Dissertation.

Key words: Bologna Process, undergraduate students, dissertations, research projects, United Kingdom, multilingual environment, pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The competences which feature in the Bologna 'tuning' process at the end of the First Cycle (European Union Directorate General for Education and Training, 2003) include independent selection of texts to be read, critical thinking and synthesis, collaborative work and independent working, linking to postgraduate and professional writing. In some universities in the United Kingdom a final Dissertation (or Research Project) in the 3rd Year B.A. is designed to fulfill these objectives. This paper reports on action research with final year B.A. English Language Studies (BA ELS) students completing their Undergraduate Dissertations in a 'new' university in

the UK. 'New' universities appeared after 1992 as a consequence of the government's drive to increase the percentage of 18 year olds in education from 10% to 30% (England: Department for Education and Skills, 2003:57). This is often termed 'the widening participation scenario'. The university in question has a high percentage of non-native speakers.

In BA Degrees students typically study over three years and are principally assessed by set essays of 2-3000 words and oral presentations, rarely by examination. The Dissertation provides them with the opportunity to write on a task which they choose themselves. When my colleague and I took over the teaching of the Undergraduate Dissertation module in 2007, we were also working against a background of a high degree of fluidity in the student body where many students in the Second or Third Year BA ELS had transferred from other London- or European-based universities during the course of their degree. Although non-native speaker International and EU students made more morphological errors in their work than students educated in the UK, challenges of topic choice, genre structure and criticality occurred across native and non-native speakers.

Not all Undergraduate degrees in the UK have a compulsory Dissertation. Some course leaders have avoided including them, feeling that they are too challenging. Where they do exist, Dissertations account for around one eighth of the marks of towards students' degree classification. Producing a Dissertation of up to 12,000 words in two semesters (for BA Single Honours) is likely to be the most demanding task that Undergraduates will have faced.

2. Background Literature

Like Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998 and 1999), and Teresa Lillis (2003) we see forms of academic writing as social practice. Subject area writing conventions will need to be made clear to students as practices of an academic community with which they are not familiar (academic literacies approach). However, we believe that the genre approach (Swales and Feak, 2000; Hyland, 2000) where the 'moves' and register of different writing types are overtly made clear to students is useful here. This approach is now improved through the availability of databases of academic work (Swales & Feak, 2000; Hyland, 2004).

3. The Teaching Situation

There are two language pathways in the BA ELS. Native speakers take four 'content' modules per semester, while non-native speakers take three content modules and one general English module until they have reached approximately the level of Cambridge Proficiency English. Long Dissertations (9500 words) of Single English Honours worth 15 European Credit Transfer (ECT) points students have to be completed in two semesters and shorter Dissertations of Joint Honours students (4500 words) worth 7 ECT 1/2 points in one semester (14 weeks). When we assumed responsibility for the Dissertation Modules, students received six hours' initial class tuition covering: an introduction to the purpose of the Dissertation and choice of Dissertation topics, an introduction to research methods and a library lecture on literature search. Students were required to submit a Dissertation Proposal Form by Week 4 of the module.

After the initial class sessions students were entitled to some tutorial support, the onus being on them to make tutorial appointments with their supervisor.

In 2007 we had already taken the step of moving away from a 'long discursive Dissertation format of:

- Introduction
- Secondary sources evaluated
- Conclusion.

We created an opportunity for students to undertake a piece of primary research such as a first hand case study or text analysis in an area which they had read about. The recommended structure of the final Dissertation then became:

- introduction and research situation
- literature review
- methodology and ethics,
- methods of analysis, data collection, analysis of the data,
- conclusion and discussion.

This was interesting for the students, at the same time shortening the word count of the literature review. Students found it relatively easy to write up a 'method', their preferred one being a survey. They related easily to carrying out surveys as most of

them had experience of consumer surveys. By encouraging students to tackle topics which in many cases related to aspects of their lives, we were facilitating a reflective approach. To illustrate, a Polish-born student first read about ESOL teaching in the UK and the Polish community in London for her literature review, then wrote an observational study of a Polish-speaking child learning English in a London primary school.

4. The Research

The funded research was conceived of as a year-long piece of action research. A total of 48 students took part. However, long before that, we had been keeping field notes. A pre-course and a post-course questionnaire were issued to students containing a mix of quantitative items and some qualitative ones intended to elicit deeper responses (Bell, 2005; Norton, 2009). A research assistant also conducted a sample of qualitative interviews before and after the Dissertation. A volunteer was sought to write a learning log about her experiences during the module. Response to the post-Dissertation questionnaires delivered to the particular set of students completing in February 2009 was 100%; other response rates varied. Written permission was obtained from students to use anonymised questionnaire responses and interview scripts for the purposes of data analysis.

We discovered that all students were novices in research except one who had completed a UK Sociology school-leaving exam. Many students experienced excitement about doing a research Dissertation on their own. However, about half the students reported negative feelings such as 'uncertainty', 'confusion' or 'anxiety', especially with regard to choosing and defining their Dissertation area, hardly a desirable situation.

Many students were worried about time management. We knew from our tutorial records that some students managed their time poorly, working on their Dissertations only towards the end of the designated period. Students' perceived difficulties also concerned finding and comparing academic sources. There were indeed a lot of false starts with the literature searches. In the post-dissertation questionnaire this response was followed by the difficulty of organisation of the literature review. To illustrate, it was not obvious to a Spanish student investigating the linguistic behaviour of British

migrants to Spain how she could organise her ideas which crossed between sociological and linguistic aspects. Regarding teaching improvements, students' suggestions included viewing more sample Dissertations. This fitted in with our leaning towards the genre approach and how we did this will be described below.

Language issues were way down on the students' lists, though based on our analysis of completed dissertations, citation was one of our priorities.

Therefore, based on our analysis of previous students' work and the students' responses the principal areas of the Dissertation teaching to be worked on were:

- Dissertation topic choice
- time and self-management
- argument structure in the literature review
- criticality within the literature review including methods of citation

5. Changes to the Module and Teaching

The following changes were made:

5.1 Choice of Dissertation Topic

To address this, we decided to explain how a topic area might be narrowed down according to four parameters: geographic space, period of time and academic school of thought and group of people. Drawing on our knowledge of learning styles theory, as recounted in Heather Fry, Steve Ketteridge & Stephanie Marshall (2008), we showed this by using diagrams to cater   for students with visual learning styles.

Collaborative learning, recommended under the Bologna tuning process, was exploited in when some of the class time was used so that groups of students could challenge each others' titles. Students were realistic in spotting other students' unachievable 'dream topics'. This was an effective way of trimming topics and titles down to manageable amounts without damping students' enthusiasm.

5.2 Documentation

The on-line module Handbook is the student's first point of reference for guidance about purpose, content and grading of any module. This is especially important in case students miss one of the initial teaching sessions. We redesigned this, inserting several bulleted lists and diagrams to cater for students with visual learning styles. We also added examples of student decisions and choices.

The intranet system *Web learn* holds an on-line bank of materials from lectures and seminars for students to refer back to or print off, if they are absent. We now also provided there a basic alphabetic glossary of research-related vocabulary on the module, which was just as useful for most of the native speakers as for non-native English speaking students.

5.3 Time Management and Self-Management

To tackle this time challenge we took a four-pronged approach. Firstly we included in the module handbook a calendar of suggested 'milestones' against which students could map their progress, for example it showed 'editing and proofreading' against the final three weeks of the two semester-long 9,500 word long Dissertation. Secondly, students and tutors jointly filled in a *pro forma* record of short and long term targets agreed at the end of each tutorial. Thirdly we began to proactively contact students deemed as 'high risk' if they did not appear for tutorials. Fourthly Tutorial advice was handled by email when circumstances such as family illness meant students could not attend face to face.

5.4. Approaching the Literature Review

5.4.1 Refining Reading Lists

Most students needed guided practice in using the various on-line article search engines, not merely a single demonstration of each by a librarian. The search demonstration and workshop was now held in a computer room so that each student could apply the search methods demonstrated. An extra teaching session was held in the fifth week of the module which gave students the opportunity to report how successful some of their searches had been. Student reading lists were pooled. Lists were laid open to the scrutiny of student colleagues. Students with topics where there was less material available were then encouraged to make an individual appointment with the librarian in order to expand their reading lists.

5.4.2 Structuring the Literature Review

Although there is no compulsion to review the literature within a single section of the Dissertation (it could be spread out in chapters of findings), the 'single section structure' is a safe way for the novice to handle it. The literature review is arguably by far the most difficult aspect of writing a Dissertation. It should show knowledge of

the field and gaps in current knowledge – but should only contain material *of relevance to the student's investigation*. The literature review is not a straightforward sub-genre to organise. We found that this 'structuring' was poorly supported in existing dissertation manuals, or university intranet 'guidance' sites. For example, Judith Bell's book 'Doing Your Research Project' (2005), which then served as our students' manual, only states that a literature review should provide the reader with a brief idea of current knowledge and major themes within the subject area of the research (Bell, 2005, p. 21). Students have difficulty organising ideas from their reading, because there is a larger quantity of it than previously quite a lot of it is repetitive. The structure of the literature review will depend on the ideas which the student groups together. Both John Swales & Christine Feak (2000:118-124), and Chris Hart (1995) provide the helpful suggestion of giving students practice sets of article abstracts to discuss potential arrangement of these into clusters, a procedure we successfully tried. Before this, students would often write about each book or article they had read, separately, leading to considerable overlap in information. Most students needed to be told that they can write about one idea and put two references in a bracket. Based on the genre approach, several invented, abridged Undergraduate literature reviews were made available on the module's *Web learn* (intranet teaching site), with colour coding for various items such as sections, links between sections, and citation style. It was important to us that the sample literature reviews be as different from each other as possible to avoid the risk of students thinking that there is only one way of writing one.

5.4.3 Reading and Criticality

Swales & Feak (2000), referring to postgraduates, have noticed, as we did, that student literature reviews are often little more than an uncritical account of the field. Students were given brief exercises in critical reading (following on from those covered in the First Year of the Degree), involving them in criticising sources. Using a template, they were invited to consider the discipline, period and school from which writers stemmed, and what degree of evidence the authors gave for their view.

Another related issue was that our students had had a tendency to cite using only the bracketed reference form in the body of their texts. Ken Hyland (2004)

usefully gives most common ways of referencing and citing in various subject areas. In our area the method most commonly occurring is author's name plus reporting verbs: 'suggest', 'argue', 'show', 'explain', 'find' and 'point out'. Native and non-native speakers alike benefited from a lesson about this, which we delivered shortly before the dissertation hand-in.

Many non-native speakers still needed to consider when proofreading morphemic issues such as inclusion/non-inclusion of definite article, for which they were advised to take advantage of the central Learning Development Unit's services.

6. Evaluation of Pedagogic Changes

Results of Dissertations improved. However, results may vary annually and will depend on many factors, including the commitment of the cohort of students. Some students still tended to work 'last minute', a feature of their relative freedom to organise themselves.

Students' style was not always better, but to us it was the overall structure of their work which mattered far more. Student evaluation of pedagogies was very positive. Several students mentioned the summaries we had put of the initial workshops on *Web learn* as essential. With regard to potential improvements to the learning and teaching situation several students doing the two-semester long 9500 word Dissertation reported that they would have preferred to have an internal deadline of handing half the work in at the end of the first semester, something we are now trialling. We asked students if they would have liked a meeting at the end of Year 2, so that they could begin devising their reading list early and all replied affirmatively, so this is something we trial in the future. Most students felt that they had acquired research and time management skills useful for a future Masters.

7. Conclusion

Against the widening participation scenario I have demonstrated how the Dissertation was made interesting for students by giving them the opportunity to undertake a short practical research project. I have argued for a regeneration of the Dissertation module handbook to take into account visual learning styles. Thirdly, many students benefited from our suggestions to help them manage their time, though these will be rejected by some as they take steps towards independence. As regards

the genre scaffolding exercises offered leading to writing a critical literature review, it is unlikely that students would universally need such detailed guidance. However, these exercises do serve to demystify the genre to a large proportion of both 'non-traditional' and non-native speaking students in a constantly changing student population. Overall, there was also a psychological benefit of pedagogic change, with students experiencing much less anxiety.

In conclusion, then, the Undergraduate Dissertation may act as a bridge between Undergraduate and Postgraduate work, but for many students to derive the maximum benefit from it, more class sessions and a great deal of modelling needs to take place.

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ЧИ Є ДИПЛОМНА РОБОТА ПЕРЕХІДНОЮ ЛАНКОЮ ДО ДИСЕРТАЦІЙНОГО ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ? АНАЛІЗ ДИПЛОМНИХ РОБІТ СТУДЕНТІВ З РІЗНИХ КРАЇН, ЯКІ НАВЧАЮТЬСЯ В ЛОНДОНСЬКОМУ УНІВЕРСИТЕТІ

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Знання, якими вирізняється Болонський процес, включають навички, які мають відношення до зростання самостійного навчання в кінці першого циклу, яке передує письмовій роботі аспірантів. В Об'єднаному Королівстві дипломна

робота часто є основою набування таких навичок.

Розглянуто проблеми, пов'язані з написанням дипломних робіт на здобуття ступеня бакалавра в курсі вивчення англійської мови у Лондонському університеті, де навчається понад 50 % студентів, для яких англійська мова не є рідною. Заропоновано рішення, які допомагають уникати проблем, що виникають під час написання дипломних робіт.

Ключові слова: Болонський процес, студент університету, дипломна робота, дослідницький проект, Об'єднане Королівство, багатомовне оточення, педагогіка.

ЯВЛЯЕТСЯ ЛИ ДИПЛОМНАЯ РАБОТА ПЕРЕХОДНЫМ ЗВЕНОМ К ДИССЕРТАЦИОННОМУ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЮ? АНАЛИЗ ДИПЛОМНЫХ РАБОТ СТУДЕНТОВ, ОБУЧАЮЩИХСЯ В ЛОНДОНСКОМ УНИВЕРСИТЕТЕ

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Знания, являющиеся отличительной чертой Болонского "регулирующего" процесса, включают навыки, имеющие отношение к увеличению самостоятельного обучения в конце первого цикла, которое предшествует письменной работе аспирантов. В Объединенном Королевстве дипломная работа часто является основой приобретения этих навыков.

Рассмотрены проблемы, связанные с написанием дипломных работ на соискание степени бакалавра в курсе изучения английского языка в Лондонском университете, где обучаются более 50% студентов, для которых английский язык не является родным. Предложены решения, которые помогают избегать проблем, возникающих при написании дипломных работ.