

Integrating Performance Assessment in the EAP Classroom

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Introduction: Theoretical Rationale

In this paper I will describe a performance task designed for and implemented in an advanced English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course for students of the Social Sciences in the Division of Foreign Languages at Tel Aviv University. In university settings, students must use language to access information, and then do something with that information. Therefore, the theoretical underpinnings of my course are 1) **content-based instruction**, 2) **performance-based assessment** and 3) **collaborative learning** principals (Kol, Schcolnik and Spector-Cohen, 2006).

Content-based Instruction

With regard to the first component, the assumption is that "language is best learned through active involvement with content" (Cushing Weigle and Jensen, 1997: 201). My course is organized around subject matter rather than language points. There is a principled approach to content, entailing thematic links, catering to the academic needs of the students.

Performance-based Assessment

The second component of the course and of each thematic unit is performance-based assessment. According to Shohamy, (1995: 188) there has been a shift towards performance assessment to get "a more valid construct of what it really means to know a language." Since each unit targets authentic purposes for learning a foreign language and the language performance necessary to meet those purposes, assessment requires students to perform or produce something using real-world contexts and simulations, focusing on processes as well as products. This kind of assessment taps into higher-level thinking and problem-solving skills, or as Wiggins (1990: 1) points out, "worthy intellectual tasks" instead of "indirect or proxy 'items'—efficient, simplistic substitutes from which we think valid inferences can be made about the student's performance..." Examples of performance tasks in an EAP setting include note-taking at a lecture, writing on an academic online forum, searching for and selecting relevant resources, giving an oral presentation, and writing a paper requiring multiple information sources.

Collaborative Learning

The third component of the course is cooperative learning, thus taking a constructivist approach to negotiating meaning. The idea is to promote dialogue and inquiry, share different points of view, and develop critical thinking skills. Here, the underlying principles include small-group learning, shared goals and outcomes, cooperative behavior; mutual goals and positive interdependence as well as individual accountability. It is important to develop work strategies and metacognitive skills such as setting goals, division of tasks, effective group dynamics and reflection on processes. In addition, the instructor's role becomes more diverse, and at different stages is one of a mediator or facilitator (Ngeow, 1998).

Implications for Course Design

A framework that incorporates content-based instruction, performance-based assessment and collaborative learning has implications for materials development, instruction and assessment. With regard to materials development, selection and

sequencing are a function of content. Performance tasks must be created using backward design (Wiggins and McTighe, 1999). Language and literacy skills are not taught as an end in themselves, but as a means to understand content in order to do something with it, allowing for consolidation of language knowledge. Students are required to integrate, synthesize, compare and apply information and this encourages the teacher to act as a facilitator. Assessment needs to be in multiple modes and measures, using multiple skills. Finally, evaluation should focus on content, not just on language.

The Learning Unit

The thematic unit for which the performance assessment was the culminating task was on the topic of stress. The unit took about a month to complete, although students were free to revise work after the unit was completed in the classroom. As the unit was the first in the course, given to mostly first-year students, the topic was fitting, not only because they were students of the social sciences, but because the first semester is a time of uncertainty and anxiety for many of them. Learning about stress and ways to deal with it would be a valuable lesson in itself for many of the students.

The unit incorporated elements of blended learning; the core text was an introductory article on stress; accompanying tasks and activities were done in the classroom and / or posted on the course Internet site. Online components included links to web sites, interactive PowerPoint presentations, forums, and computer-generated tests. Slaouti (2002:105) argues "for a specific need to explore critical information processing skills of the World Wide Webb (WWW) as part of an English for Academic purposes teaching and learning context." Today it is critical that computer literacies are included when teaching literacy skills in academic contexts.

I will now describe the performance task, and then the goals and components of the learning unit that the task grew out of.

The Performance Task

The performance task required students to analyze a case study in English; i.e. applying theory to practice. Specifically they were presented with two case studies and were asked to choose one and do the following:

Read the two case studies below. Then choose one case study and write an analysis in which you include the following:

- Identify sources of stress in the person's life according to the four types of situations that produce stress, as presented in the "Stress" article in your booklet.
- Identify the person's responses to stress in his or life, according to the general types of reactions to stress, as presented in the "Stress" article and the other sources you have read.
- Last, suggest what the person could do to reduce stress in his / her life.

In order to be able to apply theory to practice, it was necessary to use backward design to determine the skills and strategies required to perform this task

Goals of the Unit

Academic / Literacy / Language Goals

These included teaching students previewing strategies for academic texts and introducing the most common academic text types, including the descriptive / informative text. It was important that students understood that with the exception of this rhetorical device, the others (analysis, refutation, problem-solution, etc.) are written by academics for their peers. The writer presupposes that the reader has a depth of academic and cultural background knowledge that first-year students most probably lack. Therefore when reading academic texts students are likely to encounter reading problems that are not exclusively language specific. We addressed the idea of methods for building and activating background knowledge, including using resources such as the Internet. In addition, students learned how to highlight and mark their texts, looking for definitions, superordinates and examples, and to develop their own systems for taking notes in the margins and marking important points. Students were exposed to methods of information transfer, in this unit, specifically outlining. Students began work on summarizing and essay writing, addressing issues such as proper citation (paraphrasing, quoting) as well as avoiding

plagiarism. They learned about the writing process, including revising multiple drafts.

Collaborative Goals

As noted, a constructivist approach to negotiation of meaning was adopted. At certain points, students were asked to discuss the content of the unit either as a class or in small groups. In the beginning of the unit, students first built or activated background knowledge on the topic of stress by taking an online stress test and then participating in an online forum in which they reacted to the content of a web site about stress and students. When students analyzed the case study vis-à-vis the resource materials, they were also put into small groups and were encouraged to negotiate meaning together. Although they were eventually required to write the analysis on their own, the process of discussing the content together was invaluable as it simulates the process of participating in one's academic discourse community.

Affective Goals

The fact that the unit on stress was placed at the beginning of the course did have affective considerations. Feedback from students on the forum, emails and summaries to the instructor, as well as from informal conversations revealed that the information they learned and the fact that they openly discussed their concerns did help them diffuse some of the anxiety they felt as new university students. In addition, the fact that the course strategies were motivated by how this could help them in their content courses and the fact that strategies are transferable to Hebrew and other languages also had positive affective consequences. The fact that students were allowed to use Hebrew in the classroom and L1 in small groups when relevant also allowed them to stay on task and defuse a stressful situation in the English class, creating a 'safe' atmosphere. Finally, the fact that students were allowed to revise their performance task (the case study analysis) as many times as they chose to (in theory, allowing a grade of 100 for anyone who was willing to put in the time and effort) was at first shocking for them. Some even looked at me suspiciously when I discussed the opportunity for revision. When I stressed that for me the process of learning was much more important than the product or the grade, I feel that the affective goals were most achieved.

The Administration of the Task

In preparation for the task, students were asked to bring all their resources on stress to the next lesson. In that lesson, students were given the two case studies and together with the instructor, read through them carefully. They discussed the content and any questions were answered by the instructor. The instructor then went through the directions for the case study analysis and answered any questions. In addition, the instructor explained the assessment rubrics, and for any students who were not familiar with the concept, what an assessment rubric was in general. Together, they went through the descriptors in the assessment rubric separately, and any additional questions were answered. Then the instructor asked the students to get into small groups of three or four. The task was to discuss the assignment, and to analyze the case study together, taking a collaborative approach. The choice of which case study to analyze was left to the group. One group member was chosen to be the 'note-taker'. The instructor walked around the room, listening, answering questions, and keeping groups 'on task.' The discussion was allowed to progress in whatever language the members chose. About fifteen minutes before the end of the lesson, the instructor 'wrapped up' the lesson, and each group reported a few of their ideas to the rest of the class. The assignment for the next lesson was for each student to plan his/her analysis, the first draft to be written in the following class. The instructor noted that the first draft should be written in class, although brainstorming and planning should be done beforehand. The option of revision would be given afterwards. The instructor also reminded students of the checklist for revising essays that had been worked on in class, and told them to bring it with their resources.

In the next lesson, students came with their resources, notes and dictionary and wrote their case study analysis in class. The analyses were handed in and during the next few days the instructor read then and gave feedback. In line with a content-based approach, primary emphasis was given for content, then organization, and finally grammar / language points, or a COG pattern (Cushing Weigle et al, 2003).

In the next lesson, the instructor handed back the analyses to the students. She had made a list of points that were common to many of the analyses and discussed them in class. These points included content, organization and language issues. For example, some students did not define the term 'stress' before relating to sources of it (content), or some used the incorrect construction "I will recommend him to..." (grammar). She also included points that were worthy of praise, and discussed

them, as well. Then she reminded students that they were allowed to revise their analyses, based on the feedback that was given, and that they were required to submit the new (typed) and previous draft(s). She gave a deadline of two weeks for any revisions.

Reflection

For the Instructor

The experience was a valuable one, although backward design is complex and involved. The process is rewarding, but with 40 students in a class, correcting the analyses and revisions is an enormous undertaking. However, these are the types of tasks that students do need to perform, and it is activities such as these that prepare them more effectively for their academic studies.

For the Student

Although I did not give a reflection form, I did ask my class informally what mode of learning they thought was more effective: a traditional reading comprehension test, or the learning unit we did with the culminating case study analysis. Students reported that the depth of processing they had to go through to apply the information to the case study was much deeper than what they would have had to do to on a traditional reading comprehension test.

Conclusion

EAP contexts should adopt a content-based, collaborative approach to language learning, implementing performance based assessment to mirror the types of academic tasks that students need to perform in their content courses. Although this entails a great deal of effort by both the instructor and the student, the rewards greatly outweigh the investment.

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