ACADEMIC LITERACY SUPPORTED BY INTEGRATED CONTENT AND LANGUAGE TEACHING – EVIDENCE FROM STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

In higher education, the focus of instruction is usually on the substance knowledge areas. However, the development of generic working life skills has received increased attention in higher education, largely as a response to the needs of the labour market [1]. Writing and academic literacy are examples of such generic skills. Effective use of resources and finding a motivating way to deliver academic literacy instruction are goals that require innovative solutions from higher education institutions. Different variants of the content and language integrated learning (CLIL) paradigm have gained popularity in higher education to answer these economic and pedagogical concerns (see, e.g. [2]).

This paper examines an integrated bachelor’s seminar course and writing instruction offered by the university’s language center. The integrated model is an innovation in which the students’ academic literacy and the quality of writing in the bachelor thesis can be improved with relatively little resource allocation, i.e., the language teacher. The areas covered in the language instruction include writing as a process, the structure of the thesis, citing sources, style and readability.

Students were asked how the integrated language instruction supported their learning and writing. Since the technical university has multiple bachelor programs, comparison between students from different disciplines is done to gain insight of how the language instruction affects students with different literacy backgrounds and study curriculums. The students’ perceptions of the effect on their writing are compared with similar integration experiences discussed in other studies, e.g. [3], [4], [5].

Keywords: Academic literacy, BSc. seminar, Integration, CLIL.

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Students’ progress in learning as well as their understanding of their field is typically evaluated on the basis of a written product, such as an essay or a thesis. Thus, academic writing skills, and more specifically the ability to write in a way that is generally approved in the students’ discipline is crucial in terms of students’ success in their studies (see, e.g., [6]). At our university the various study programs vary also in the amount they require written assignments, i.e., essay-type (e.g., management, environmental engineering) vs. calculative (e.g., mathematics, computer sciences).

In addition, disciplines have writing conventions and norms that differ from each other. Thus, academic writing requires not only competence in academic writing per se but also knowledge about norms and conventions that are specific for a particular discipline. The expectations need to be explicitly communicated for the students to be able to participate successfully in the academic community. However, also the role of the students as active participants is important when academic literacy is approached with the assumption that reading and writing are practices that are cultural and contextual, and therefore heterogeneous and dynamic [3].

Research has shown that there are discrepancies in staff and student expectations on what is considered “good” academic writing [7], [5]. It also appears to be the case that students are not told explicitly what is expected of them with regard to academic discourse [5; p. 296].

It has been found that students’ confidence in their writing skills influences their writing motivation [5], see also [8]. Thus, it is important to design courses that impact positively students’ self-efficacy [5], [9], [10]. Attaining academic literacy is a term that has been used to refer to the socialization process in which students not only learn a range of skills that are needed in writing, but also become comfortable in communicating in discipline-specific ways (see, e.g., [6], [11]).

The globalization of the labour market and of higher education institutions set demands for language studies in higher education. At the same time, in the wake of the Bologna Agreement, degrees have
become more compact. Thus, innovative solutions are needed to use scarce resources effectively and to find motivating ways to deliver language instruction. Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) has gained popularity in higher education as an approach that answers these political, economic and pedagogical concerns (see, e.g. [12], [2]).

At Tampere University of Technology (Finland) Bachelor level language courses (Finnish as the first language, Swedish as the compulsory second language, and English as the compulsory foreign language) are integrated with content courses. CLIL is a new approach at this university, the first implementations having been started less than five years ago. In order to develop the courses further, it is important to evaluate the current implementations (see [13]).

We will now briefly describe the integration format that is studied in this paper. Bachelor thesis seminar courses are offered (and compulsory) in the students’ major subject. These seminar courses are integrated with scientific writing instruction, offered by the university’s language center. With the integration, students are able to improve their writing skills in their mother tongue (Finnish) when they are taking the seminar course. The language component of this integration consists of two lectures given by the language teacher, an online test, and individual feedback sessions focusing on how the student’s writing can be improved. In addition, the bachelor supervisor, according to individual capabilities, may take a stand on current issues. Integrating the Finnish language writing instruction into the Bachelor thesis increases students’ possibilities to receive individual feedback on their thesis during the writing process. Prior to this integration model, students received feedback on their writing only at the end of the writing process (the so called maturity test). Besides one-on-one consultation with the language teacher, the students have access to the lecture materials, which they can use to help them in the writing process.

2 THE SURVEY

A survey questionnaire was drawn based on previous literature, individual researcher interests, and the interests of the language center of the university. The questionnaire contained eight background questions enquiring the study program, the Finnish language grade in the matriculation examination, and literacy habits of the respondent, e.g., what kinds of texts they have read or written in the past. The students’ experiences on the integrated language instruction was then asked with 36 learning centered questions. The majority of the questions were executed with radio buttons with 5-point Likert scaling. In addition, there were seven open-ended questions to elaborate and give more depth to the answers. These questions covered areas of getting tools for reading and writing from the course both on general level and especially in the context of scientific texts.

The survey was executed by using available tools in the web. Google Forms was used to compile the survey. Respondents completed the questionnaire online. Prior to launching the questionnaire, it was tested on a group of 14 students having accomplished the bachelor’s course in its entirety. After the test run, six students were interviewed to give depth to the responses received. According to the interviews, minor modifications on individual questions were made on the questionnaire. After the modifications, the questionnaire was released to the whole population of the participants (527 students). To encourage answering, rewards of combo movie tickets was promised to be raffled among the respondents.

The answering period was set to two weeks, during which four reminders were sent to the participants. Among the feedback received, there were few individual remarks of getting too much dunning mails. The return behaviour, however, defends the recurring in sending the semblance of answering. After each reminder, there was a spike to be observed in answering. The total number of respondents was 193, achieving an answer rate of 36,6 %. The percentage is reasonably good to enable generalizations, and to give foundation for conclusions [14]. The response rate for online surveys varies, but the average number is somewhat over 30 % [15].

3 FINDINGS

Attitudes toward reading and writing among the students seems to be mainly positive. Although writing as a hobby in the freetime is not common among the respondents, they still portray a mainly positive outlook toward their confidence in writing. In terms of reading, the students are a heterogeneous group. In answering an open question about what and how much they read, the answers ranged from “I don’t read at all” to “I read multiple hours a day”. In addition to the most common prose and sci-fi literature, non-fiction was also quite popular, and many students mentioned blogs and news as
additional something they read regularly. The respondents were also asked what kind of academic texts they have read. Surprisingly only 81.6% answered that they have read journal articles and 62.1% that they have read bachelor theses. Since this questionnaire was conducted in the middle of their bachelor thesis preparation, the numbers could indicate that some students have interpreted this question to refer to what they have read before the bachelor seminar. Since reading both journal articles and bachelor theses is an integral part of preparing a thesis and taking part in the seminar, we would have expected these numbers to be at least close to 100%. To make sense of this particular aspect further scrutiny is needed.

A relatively small portion of the respondents (16.8%) reported that they write during their free time. Of those who do write, the variety of writing ranges from blogs and product reviews to poems and short stories, to mention a few. Not surprisingly, those who write during their free time, feel that writing is easy for them, as none of them disagreed with the claim “writing is easy for me” (the light grey sections in figure 2).

Of those who do not write during their free time, also a majority feels that writing in general is at least moderately easy. This reflects the fact that students who come to the technical university have done on average well on their matriculation exams, including the native language test. Figure 1 illustrates 69.3% of the respondents receiving one of the three highest grades, compared to the national distribution of 40% receiving these grades in the tests.

![Figure 1. The native language matriculation exam grades of the respondents.](image)

When asked specifically about academic writing, the confidence in writing is a little lower, with the majority of answers being on three in the Likert scale, i.e. the students neither agree nor disagree with the claim that academic writing is easy for them. However, also a large number of students agree that writing academic text is easy for them.
When asked about the extent of learning during the integrated language instruction, most of the students indicated that they did not learn very much. As a whole, there were no significant differences in the amount of learning based on the previous academic success of the students, although those who did best in the matriculation exams tended to disagree most with that they learned a lot from the language instruction. This result is to be expected, since part of the language instruction is about revising grammar.

Although many students indicated that they did not learn much from the language instruction, they still feel that they are more ready to produce academic text after the integrated language instruction. This indicates that although the students are not highly motivated to participate in the language instruction, and they feel that they are not getting much from the instruction, it still helps them in their academic writing. In the interviews where the survey form was discussed this was brought up as well; “I was really not in the mood to study grammar or citation techniques, but in the end I must admit it did help me in writing up my bachelor”. This goes to show that even though students may feel that they are not entirely up to speed or even have not learned at all, they still could freshen and summon up their linguistic skills.
Looking at the total cohort, approximately 40% of the students feel that writing academic texts is easy for them (columns 4 and 5 taken together in Figure 2). Approximately 26% feel that writing academic texts is not easy for them (columns 1 and 2). When looking at the different study programs, there are differences in the level of confidence, especially between civil engineering and electrical engineering. Civil engineering students seem to be more confident in writing academic texts, as 50% of them agree with the statement. In addition, only 16.66% of the civil engineering students either completely disagree or disagree with the statement. In comparison, among electrical engineering students there are more students disagreeing with the statement (25% either completely disagree or disagree). The difference between these student groups is more drastic in the percentage of agreeing and completely agreeing with the statement, with only 16.66% of electrical engineering students agreeing with the statement.

Further scrutiny might show that the typical publications in each discipline are indeed somewhat different by nature (e.g., electronics vs. civil engineering) as it would intuitively appear to be. This, however, is not studied in this paper and is left for future research. Similarly, the students in each program and the requirements presented upon them vary. This may have an effect on the students and their abilities in regard of academic literacy. This interesting theme is equally left for future research.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A majority of students report having gained understanding of what constitutes good scientific text and how to produce it. In addition to this, a majority of respondents report having acquired concrete tools for their own writing. A small percentage of respondents reported writing in their leisure time. Equally not all students read much besides their duties in university.

Integrating content and language seems to provide an environment where it is possible for the students to improve their academic literacy. Even though the students feel they did not learn that much, they still report feeling like better writers after the integrated course. This might be because of possibilities to engage in activities with which academic literacy is constructed, such as becoming familiar with the genres of their field in the seminars and in feedback sessions with the language teacher. The combination of reading academic texts and discussing academic texts with the seminar supervisors and the language teacher are part of the socialization process in which students become more competent and confident in communication in discipline-specific ways.

REFERENCES


