Starting Out Right: Guiding Students Towards ESP

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One challenge facing teachers in many science and technical universities in Japan is how to effectively prepare first year students for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. The impetus for this paper comes from challenges I have faced teaching first year students in writing and speaking classes at a science university. These students are eventually required to take English for specific purposes classes in their third year. Specifically, this paper deals with constructing genre-based classroom projects for classes of mixed English abilities. Challenges in this area include considering how to scaffold the cognitive load of learning new academic genres. Also, assisting learners with the demanding task of acquiring new vocabulary for producing these genres.

The topics discussed in this paper include considerations for choosing topics that may be more accessible, and less cognitively demanding for students. In addition, there is a discussion on adapting media from the internet as source material for student projects. Finally the paper ends with a brief introduction of the website, www.lextutor.ca (Cobb, n.d.) This can be a useful tool for students and teachers alike with respect to exploring the vocabulary found in the texts students use in the classroom.

Project Choice: Cognitive Considerations

Early in the task planning process teachers must consider which topics may be at a suitable level for their students to engage in effectively. Starting with less cognitively challenging tasks can be considered a way to help build confidence

and fluency before moving on to more challenging tasks. A continuum described by Cummins (1983) and illustrated below can be a useful tool for teachers for scaffolding tasks.

Figure 1 shows the level of difficulty in the tasks starts from the upper left-hand quadrant, which includes the cognitively least demanding; that is to say dealing with subject matter familiar to the students. Tasks located towards the bottom right hand quadrant of the diagram include the least familiar and thus the most challenging topics and activities.

The following list of descriptions of some example activities, is based on the work of Myskow, Underwood and Hattori (2012). In the A Quadrant, activities may include personal diaries, speaking about daily events or other topics that are familiar to the student. B Quadrant activities might include an essay or speeches on a topic familiar to the students. In the C quadrant, students could offer opinions on a less familiar topic, or begin to use academic register. For example, using specialized vocabulary or longer, more formal sentence structures
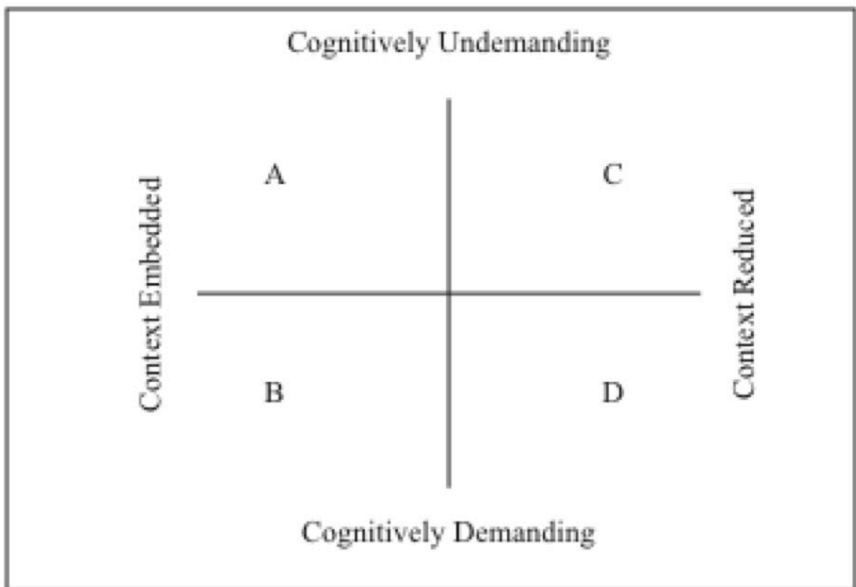

Figure 1. Range of contextual support and degree of cognitive involvement in communicative activities (Cummins 1983: cited in Myskow, Underwood and Hattori, 2012, p. 24).

("Introduction to Academic Register", n.d.). The D Quadrant is the most demanding and could include academic arguments on unfamiliar topics.

In my own classes, I have to introduce academic argument to first year students. Some topic choices include discussing the pros and cons of the following: a junk food tax, smoking areas on campus, and part-time jobs. These topics deal with situations close to the students' everyday lives and also generally use less demanding vocabulary. This gives the students a chance to analyze and produce simple examples of the argument genre by focusing on the structure and basic language. This eliminates being dually challenged by the necessity of learning new specialized vocabulary and ideas, as well as how to present this information.

As students begin to feel comfortable with the basic argument structure, I move towards topics that are less context-embedded and involve more technical vocabulary. One such topic might be arguing for and against the need for space exploration. This is a topic that the science students I have taught seemed to have some basic background in and a topic that can be scaffolded by using information readily found on the Internet.

Using News Media as a Source for Students

The idea of using news sources in the genre-based classroom is not new. Bhatia (1993) states that news sources "present the use of language which is fresh, topical and current... It is possible to use this source for EGP (English for General Purposes, EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes" (p. 158). Given this varied nature of news media, it can provide great flexibility for the classroom. Also, the inclusion of more current topics could possibly lead to increased student motivation, especially if the topics are aligned with the students' areas of interest.

One problem that I have found in my classes is that many of these news stories need to be adapted in order to suit the level of the students, both in content and in language. One way to make information accessible for students in longer news articles is to isolate certain parts of the news media used. Consider, for example, setting up an academic argument task. A list of statements from a news source,

both in support and against a particular issue, could be made. Students could then have the task of categorizing this list. After the list has been categorized into for and against arguments, students could practice paraphrasing the points before including them in their own arguments.

Another factor teachers have to consider is the level of the vocabulary that is used in the articles and in the next section of this paper the Website www. lextutor.ca will be discussed.

Online Tools for Exploring Vocabulary

The Compleat Lexical Tutor (www.lextutor.ca) is a website that has a range of vocabulary tools, such as a vocabulary test builder, tools that deal with concordances, word families and frequency of words. For the purposes of this paper, the Vocabprofile tool will be discussed.

The VP-Classic tool, http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng/, on the The Compleat Lexical Tutor Website, is an interface where a text up to 35,000 words can be inputted. The VP-Classic is an adaption of Heatly, Nation and Coxhead's range and frequency programs (these can be downloaded directly form Nation's homepage at http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/paul-nation). This tool can be used to find the range of words that occur in the first and second thousand-word word lists as well as words that appear on the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000). After a text has been submitted the words are color-coded as per the word list to which they belong. These are presented in various ways, separately, in the context of the text, and as a set of percentages from each word list. This tool can give language instructors a very good idea of the relative difficulty of the texts that they are intending to use. Which difficult words to replace with more simple alternatives, or which words to include on vocabulary lists or as pre-task assignments can be determined from this information.

The Compleat Lexical Tutor can also be a useful tool for students. After demonstrating how to use the interface, the students can input any online articles that they need to use in class and easily see the words that they do not know. They can also see if these words are on the academic word list or not. This information can be used to assist students in creating their own, personalized

vocabulary lists. It can also give students a tool for exploring vocabulary beyond the classroom. One drawback of this system however, is that it may be difficult for student to understand which of the off-list words might be more useful to them than the others.

Conclusion

When constructing genre-based activities for the first year English for academic purposes or ESP classroom there are several difficulties to overcome. Teachers are faced with the challenge of how to make the genres being studied accessible as well as meaningful to the students. Considering how cognitively demanding topics may be, adapting news sources for classroom use, and employing vocabulary tools such as The Compleat Lexical Tutor can all be ways that teachers can accomplish this task. Gradually working toward activities that utilize more vocabulary and content specific to the learners' areas of study can help prepare them for the ESP courses they will eventually be required to attend.

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