

Toward Greater Linguistic Equity in Higher Education: Engaging with Language in the Disciplines

Dr Rachel Burke

Project Summary

Language and literacy practices represent significant barriers to engagement in higher education for many learners from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds (Terry, Naylor, Nguyen, & Rizzo: 2016; Hirani, 2014; Briguglio & Watson, 2014; Skyrme & McGee, 2016). While subject-specialist language and textual practices can present ongoing linguistic barriers to engagement in higher education, this important aspect of widening participation is often overlooked in institutional policy, and remains noticeably under researched, particularly in terms of practical implications for academics engaged in teaching.

This study explored academics' understandings of the linguistic embeddedness of their discipline, their perceptions regarding the linguistic needs and strengths of learners, and their approaches to scaffolding learner engagement with specialist language and discursive practices. Ten academics from a range of STEM and humanities-related fields participated in narrative-based interviews focused on eliciting significant moments, important events, and teaching experiences that have shaped their understandings and practices regarding language and literacy.

The experiences of the academics in this research offer a useful vantage point from which to consider the various ways in which language and literacy may be conceptualised in higher education, the possibilities for embedding linguistic support in content area instruction, and the need to ensure tailored and responsive language assistance for learners throughout their studies.

Key Points

- The project provided a comprehensive account of participants' current practices regarding linguistic inclusion across a range of degrees (including undergraduate, postgraduate, and Research Higher Degree) and disciplines.
- For all ten academics, there was notable cohesion between conceptualisations of language, their self-reported classroom practices, and the roles they assumed in relation to student language development.
- While most participants had not received formal professional development regarding strategies for scaffolding student engagement with subject-specific language, they described a range of innovative and discipline-specific approaches, indicating a strong awareness of the need to offer students authentic and meaningful communicative contexts in which to develop subject-specialist literacies.

Recommendations for Policy or Practice

Participants provided explicit and detailed recommendations for better assisting academics to scaffold student language engagement 'at the coalface' of higher education.

A key theme within these recommendations was the need to facilitate greater collaboration between learning development, English Language Teaching (ELT), and discipline specialists. All ten participants were careful to note that broad categories, such as 'EAL/D' or 'international student', are not necessarily helpful in anticipating learners' linguistic strengths and needs. In fact, participants reflected on the potential for such categories to deny the diverse educational and linguistic experiences of learners, suggesting instead some form of institutional guidelines for early and ongoing linguistic support for all learners.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study reinforces the need for widening participation efforts to focus on supporting student engagement throughout the entirety of their degree, and for further research regarding the most effective means of offering tailored and responsive language and literacy assistance.

Professional development for all staff regarding the role of language and literacies in mediating engagement with content, possibilities for facilitating literacy and language development within discipline instruction, and exploration of implications for academic workload and professional development needs are also important foci for ongoing research.

Finally, systematic investigations of productive and efficient collaborations between academics, bridging/enabling program educators, and language support staff are required to frame best practice approaches to the provision of effective language support for all students.

References

- Briguglio, C. & Watson, S. (2014). Embedding English language across the curriculum in higher education: A continuum of development support. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 37/1
- Hirani, E. (2014). 'I read, I don't understand': refugees coping with academic reading. *ELT Journal*. 69/2, 178-187
- Skyrme, G. & McGee, A. (2016). Pulled in many directions: tensions and complexity for academic staff responding to international students. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21/7, 759-772
- Terry, L. Naylor, R., Nguyen, N., & Rizzo, A. (2016). Not There Yet. An Investigation into the Access and Participation of Students from Humanitarian Refugee Backgrounds in the Australian Higher Education System. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth

Contact

Dr Rachel Burke

University of Newcastle

School of Education

rachel.burke@newcastle.edu.au