

Tips for academic teaching staff

Language and academic skills: relevant ideas

In the context of higher education, the term 'language and academic skills' generally includes three competencies (Murray, 2010):

1. English language proficiency
2. Academic literacy
3. Professional communication skills

Definitions

English language proficiency: 'a language user's control of the formal and functional properties of language such that they are able to express and understand meaning accurately, fluently, and appropriately according to context' (Murray, 2010).

Academic literacy: 'the capacity to undertake study and research, and to communicate findings and knowledge, in a manner appropriate to the particular disciplinary conventions and scholarly standards expected at university level' (University of Western Australia, 2005).

Professional communication: the ability of students to deploy skills and strategies for communicating in an academic environment according to the particular demands of their discipline as well as those of the profession into which they eventually hope to enter (Murray, 2010).

Educational psychology

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934):

- Stressed the social origins of language and of cognitive development
- Established a deep and explicit connection between speech and cognitive development
- 'Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*)...All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals.' (*Mind in Society*, 1978, p. 57)
- Learning is seen not as a process of transmission but as one of interaction.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

- CLT based on functional models of language
- functional models (which emphasise the use and context of language) took over from structural models (which focus on grammar and sentence structure) in the 1960s, in part as a response to Chomsky's criticisms
- involves a focus on: communicative competence; language development through social interaction; language in contexts and settings; the discourse level of language use
- approach: communication as the negotiation of meaning - between speaker and hearer, author and reader.

Principles of Communicative Language Teaching (David Nunan, 1991)

- an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language
- the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation

- the provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself
- an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning

Research and standards in Australia

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- proposes a 'developmental model' for building language competence involving a focus on testing at entry, in-course experience, and exit competency standards related to workplace requirements
- argues that language proficiency acquisition should be seen as an ongoing aspect of the whole degree program
- sees language and discipline content as inseparable

Government standards: TEQSA: Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

TEQSA standards relating to language proficiency require:

- admission criteria: sufficient competence
- course design: appropriate development
- assessment: demonstrate attainment

Katie Dunworth (Curtain University)

Proposes that challenges for universities require systemic change involving

- positioning language development as a core (not marginal) learning and teaching issue
- assessing students' language use and monitoring progress

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