An ESP Speaking Course for International Graduate Students[1]

Patricia Balcom and Seana Kozar

A critical issue in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), is whether a "wide-angle" or more discipline-specific approach should be taken (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991). If a course attempts to address students' needs in their area of study, even an EAP-trained teacher cannot be conversant with the concepts, issues, vocabulary, and discourse in a variety of scientific fields, especially with students at the graduate level. This article describes an academic speaking program in which international graduate students are grouped according to their academic discipline (e.g., hydrology, chemistry, pharmacy) and participate in activities that simulate situations where they need to use English in their academic programs. In such a situation the peer group members are the content experts, providing discipline-specific guidance and discussion, whereas the ESL teacher is the language expert, helping the students in the areas of organization, grammar, pronunciation, and presentation skills.

Introduction

In a recent article on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) distinguished between a "wide-angle" (general academic or common-core ESL) and a discipline-specific approach to ESP, and suggested that in a wide-angle approach students' needs in their particular area of study should also be met. In this article we describe an academic speaking course that fulfills this condition: international graduate students are placed in groups according to their field of study, and their peers provide them with an audience of specialists in their domain.

Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) discussed a variety of difficulties inherent in a wide-angle approach. First, they pointed out that "learners may become very irritated when confronted with texts which they regard as irrelevant to their needs" (p. 51), particularly when time is limited, as is often the case with graduate students. The time pressures for students in ESP/EAP courses was also mentioned in Robinson (1980), Blue (1981), and Johns and Dudley-Evans (1988). The frustration students experience when faced with materials they perceive as being unrelated to their studies was also referred to in Robinson (1980), Greenall (1981), Huckin and Olsen (1984), Christison and Krahnke (1986), and Wilson (1986).

Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) noted a second concern with a wide-angle approach, which stems from the fact that differences in register occur depending on the audience. If students present material to nonspecialists, they will not gain practice using a register in which it is important for them to be experienced, namely specialist-to-specialist discourse. A related difficulty we encountered before our discipline-specific groups were formed was that students believed no one else could understand their research. It was pointless to argue that experts should be able to explain their work to nonspecialists: even after students had read and discussed articles on the demystification of science, there was still a great deal of resistance.

The third issue considered by Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) is language teachers who do not have a scientific or technical background. The issue of language teachers' lack of specialized knowledge in subject areas was also discussed in Greenall (1981), Robinson (1981), Shih (1986) and Krueger and Ryan (1993). In our program the same tutor deals with graduate-level students from a variety of disciplines. For example, one tutor had different groups in mathematics and statistics and computer science, engineering, chemistry, earth sciences, and physics in the same semester. It is not feasible to expect instructors to have even a basic knowledge of the fundamentals in all of these areas, as is suggested by proponents of the wide-angle approach (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Solutions to the lack of specialist knowledge on the part of language teachers include team-teaching, adjunct courses and sheltered courses (McDonough, 1984; Coffey, 1985; Graham & Beardsley, 1986; Shih, 1986; Benesch, 1988; Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Grandin, 1993; Krueger & Ryan, 1993). However, some of the researchers cited have pointed out that having two instructors teaching a course is expensive—prohibitively so in these times of budgetary constraints—and coordination and delineation of duties between the content and language instructor can be problematic. Another solution is to recruit language teachers with a specialized technical background (Shih, 1986; Wilson, 1986; Grandin, 1993), but Greenall (1981) for one considered this unrealistic (p. 22). Moreover, the fact that an international graduate student population represents a wide variety of scientific disciplines—and changes from semester to semester—makes it difficult to recruit specialists in all areas.

In order to deal with the issues discussed above—students' time constraints, instructors' lack of discipline-specific expertise, specialized register, and students' preferences for an audience of specialists—we began to group students according to academic discipline. As it now stands, tutors are the language experts, providing guidance on matters such as organization, presentation skills, grammar, and pronunciation, whereas other students in the group are content experts, providing an audience of peers and asking

challenging questions presenters would face in a seminar, thesis defense, or conference presentation.

Program Development and Description

To demonstrate how the discipline-specific academic speaking courses fit into the wide-angle approach taken in the ESL program for graduate students, we give an overview of the entire program and then describe the academic speaking component in detail.

In order to complete a graduate degree at Memorial University, students whose first language is not English must demonstrate a satisfactory level of proficiency in the language subsequent to admission. This is a program requirement, like course work, comprehensive examinations, or a thesis. The ESL program for graduate students was developed to assist students in meeting this proficiency requirement.

Before the program was designed, a needs survey was sent to international graduate students and to all academic units, and meetings were held with professors and deans in the faculties of Engineering and Science, students of which make up over 90% of the target group. The placement and evaluation system and the program itself were designed based on these sources of information.

When international students arrive at the university, they are given a placement test, the Ontario Test of English as a Second Language (OTESL), to determine what if any ESL training they will need. Some students require no further training, whereas others need to take reading/writing courses, to participate in academic speaking groups, and/or to receive coaching in pronunciation. There are basic and advanced reading/writing courses, as well as writing tutorials (both at scheduled times and on a drop-in basis). Pronunciation is an integral part of the English program, and students who need to improve in this area are placed in small groups of two to four according to their first language. Those who require practice in listening comprehension use the language lab on an individual basis. Because students need and want opportunities to practice nonacademic uses of English, conversation classes are offered as well.

Academic Speaking Component

Students

All participants are graduate students, master's or doctoral candidates. Most are from China, some from Indonesia, and a handful from European and Latin American countries. Because international students normally require a TOEFL score of at least 550 for admission, they are fairly homogeneous in terms of English language knowledge. Between 30 and 50 students participate in academic speaking groups each semester.

Placement

Students' performance on the oral interaction component of the OTESL[2] determines whether they require courses in academic speaking. They are placed in groups of four to five based on their area of study; for example, engineers (further subdivided depending on the intake), chemists, or biologists. If there are not enough students in one discipline to form a group, they are matched with others in closely related disciplines, for example, pharmacy with medicine, earth sciences with physics, computer science with mathematics and statistics. If they so desire, these groups can break into subgroups for discipline-specific work.

Objectives

The general objective of the academic speaking courses is to assist students in improving their oral communication skills for academic purposes. More specifically, students must complete oral comprehensive examinations, present their thesis proposals, defend their theses, participate in seminars, and present papers at conferences.[3] All of these situations require students to express themselves orally in the discourse of their discipline, defend their point of view, and respond to questions from their audience. As participants in a seminar or conference, students also need to be able to ask for clarification, express a comment, agree or disagree, and provide constructive criticism.[4]

Materials

Students are encouraged to bring in articles from their content courses. We also have a bank of materials solicited from academic supervisors, including videos, articles for which students will be responsible in their comprehensive examinations, and chapters from textbooks.

Coordination and Staffing

The academic speaking courses are supervised by a coordinator who is responsible for, inter alia, testing, placing, and evaluating students, and hiring, scheduling, and supervising academic speaking tutors. All tutors are graduate students with training and experience in ESL/EFL.

Activities

Academic speaking groups meet for one hour per week for 10 weeks, usually in the evenings so that students can fulfil daytime course work and research commitments. A questionnaire is distributed during the first session to determine students' needs and perceived weaknesses. This assessment, combined with ongoing consultation with the students, enables the tutor to design a course that will address the specific needs of each group. (The needs assessment questionnaire is reproduced as Appendix A.)[5] Students sign contracts

on a weekly basis, committing themselves to complete work for the following week. This ensures that classes run smoothly, with a minimum of wasted time.

The activities of the speaking groups fall into two categories: those that closely simulate real-life academic situations and lead to improvement of students' academic presentation skills, and those that assist students in developing general communicative abilities that are also relevant to their academic needs.[6]

The former category includes simulated presentations of seminars, conference papers, and thesis proposals. Highly structured academic discourse is first broken down into its component parts, from the Abstract to the Conclusion,[7] and guidelines and models provided. Students make presentations of each section over successive weeks, culminating in an entire paper. Breaking a presentation down into its component parts ensures that each student has an opportunity to present and ask questions during a session. Students also practice the effective use of eye contact, a blackboard, overhead transparencies, and hand-outs. Each student speaks for five minutes, with a five-minute period for feedback from peers and tutor. Toward the end of the course, when students present complete papers, only two students actually present during a given session.

The second category of activities includes videos, debates, and role-plays, which may be viewed as enrichment activities to vary the classroom routine. Examples include a video from the field of hydrology to promote discussion on computer modelling versus empirical research; a debate among physics students about nuclear power projects in developing countries; and a grant-crafting role play where two students design a project proposal and present it to their classmates, who decide whether or not the proposal is worthy of funding.[8]

Oral Evaluation

One month before evaluations take place, summary forms and guidelines are sent out to those students who have a good chance of succeeding (see Appendix B for the guidelines). Probable success is determined based on students' placement test results and the opinion of their academic speaking tutor and pronunciation coach, and it is made clear to the students that although they will be evaluated, they will not automatically pass. A copy of the summary is sent to the students' academic supervisors, with the date and time of their students' evaluation. They are invited to attend or to provide questions related to the summary if they cannot.

The evaluations are 10 minutes in length, followed by a five-minute question period. The presentations simulate tasks graduate students are required to perform: conference presentations, thesis proposals, or a review of a paper.[9] There are at least two evaluators, both members of the English

NAME: _____ **DATE:** _____

DEPARTMENT/ADVISOR: _____

SKILL AREA	MARK	COMMENTS
1. CONTENT		
2. ORGANIZATION		
3. PRESENTATION		
4. GRAMMAR		
5. VOCABULARY		
6. PRONUNCIATION		
7. COMPREHENSION		

EVALUATORS: _____

EVALUATION: _____

Figure 1. Oral evaluation form.

Department. Academic supervisors usually attend, providing students with a more realistic audience and asking the types of questions they are likely to face at a conference, thesis defense, or seminar.

The evaluation, adapted from The OTESL Oral Interaction Test, is broken down into content, organization, presentation, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension of questions, and each is rated acceptable, marginal, or unacceptable. Descriptions of the criteria for each category are listed in Appendix B. One evaluator takes detailed notes on an Oral Evaluation Form (Figure 1), while the other(s) serve as the audience and ask questions during the question period. Ideally most of the interaction during the question period is between students and their academic supervisors.

As mentioned above, the goal of the academic speaking program is for students to attain an acceptable level of proficiency in academic English, so a simple "pass" or "continue" is all that is required. Because only students who have a good chance of being successful are tested, they are generally proficient in most skill areas. The weakest area is usually pronunciation. Further work is either required (if the student's rating is unacceptable) or recommended (if the rating is marginal). Students who do not pass are typically either unacceptable or marginal in at least four to seven skill areas, and would take an additional academic speaking course the following semester.

Conclusion

The academic speaking course described above provides a solution to the issues discussed in the Introduction. Students make good use of their time because they are working simultaneously on content and English, and the evening schedule does not interfere with their other academic commitments. Because many of the materials are from the students' disciplines, the question of relevance is resolved, and addressing their peers or supervisor gives students experience in using the specialist-to-specialist register they need. The audience of peers takes the pressure off the tutors to be the content experts, and they can focus on their specialty, language.

Notes

[1]Earlier versions of this article were presented at the TESL Canada section of the Learned Societies Conference held in Ottawa, June 1993, and at the Second Language Institute, University of Ottawa, August 1993. The authors would like to thank both audiences and an anonymous reviewer for their questions and comments.

[2]This instrument consists of three tasks: Task 1, participating in social interaction; Task 2, making comparisons; and Task 3, reading and responding to questions on two tables dealing with either education or energy. We put the most weight on Task 3, due to its more academic orientation.

[3]Because only a small number of these students are teaching assistants (TAs) or lab instructors, practice in teaching, demonstrating, and interacting with undergraduate students is not given. A course specifically for TAs was offered during the academic year 1993-1994.

[4]These participant skills are practiced, but not evaluated, in the formal evaluation.

[5]This questionnaire is a revised version of one prepared by Jean Compain at the Second Language Institute, University of Ottawa, which was translated into English by Bianca Sherwood and the first author. The questionnaire also has sections on reading, writing, and listening, but only the relevant portion is reproduced here.

[6]Due to the learner-centered nature of the academic speaking classes, what follows is of necessity somewhat inexplicit. There are up to 10 groups per semester, with students at different stages in their graduate programs, and each course is designed based on the particular needs of the students. The activities described should be viewed as examples only; many others are possible, as long as they involve content that is discipline-specific and enable all students to participate every week.

[7]An anonymous reviewer asked why all components were not listed. This was not possible, as disciplines vary as to what follows the Introduction. The body of a paper in mathematics or computer science may consist of theorems, algorithms, proofs, and examples, whereas in biology or pharmacy, for example, the body will consist of method (or experimental procedures), results, and discussion. Such differences in format provide another argument in favor of our discipline-specific approach.

[8]This will be described in a forthcoming article by Seana Kozar.

[9]Content and organization are controlled for in all of these tasks: content is graduate level and organization follows that of a paper in the student's discipline. The evaluation of vocabulary, grammar and syntax, presentation skills, and pronunciation is not affected by the task. In the past, students were permitted to present a lesson from an introductory course, but this is no longer the case, because we found that expectations regarding content and organization were of necessity different. Moreover, such a task, although not relevant to many students' language needs, enabled them to present material lacking the academic rigor of the other tasks.

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Appendix A
Needs Assessment

III. SPEAKING

I need to express myself clearly and be understood

– in a lecture or talk

– in a group discussion, seminar, etc.

– in face-to-face social conversation

– on the telephone

I can *I can't*

– express myself clearly & be understood in a lecture or talk

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– express myself clearly and be understood in a group discussion, seminar, etc.

– express myself clearly and be understood in a face-to-face discussion

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– express myself clearly and be understood while speaking on the telephone

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– speak quite fluently, with few pauses or hesitations

– speak without making too many errors

– express fine nuances of meaning

Keeping in mind my personal tastes, interests and professional needs, I would like to be able to use speaking to:

Appendix B
Guidelines for Students Preparing for Oral Evaluations

Oral evaluations will take place between — and —. You will prepare a short presentation (10 minutes maximum) with appropriate visual reinforcement (overheads, white board, hand-outs). Two members of the Department of English will be present, one to engage in discussion with you and the other to take notes for the purposes of evaluation. Your supervisor will be invited to attend.

You will be assessed on the following criteria.

1. *Content:* Is the topic of the presentation drawn from your current research? Does it demonstrate the kind of thinking demanded in a graduate program? Does it address questions of a specialist kind?
2. *Organization:* Does the presentation have an introduction, an explanatory development, and a conclusion? Is the development well-arranged and supported with visual material if necessary?
3. *Presentation:* Does the speaker maintain good eye contact with the audience? Does the speaker generally maintain continuity? Is the speaker able to cope with unexpected interruptions or lapses of memory? Does the speaker use visual reinforcement effectively?
4. *Grammatical and syntactic accuracy:* Is the presentation carefully prepared with attention to plurals, verb endings, appropriate word classes, as well as embedded questions, relative clauses and so on?
5. *Vocabulary:* Is the technical vocabulary appropriate? Is the correct word class used? Are transition (linking) words used effectively?
6. *Pronunciation:* Are the words, phrases, and sentences delivered in such a way as to be generally comprehensible to an English audience? Is word stress mostly on the right syllables? Are the vowels and consonants mainly accurate? Is intonation appropriate?
7. *Handling of questions:* Is the speaker able to understand the intent of the questions asked, or to request clarification? Do the speaker's answers address the questions? Does the speaker maintain an acceptable level of pronunciation, intonation, and grammatical accuracy?