Introduction

The idea for this project came from a discussion I had with students early in the semester in one of my Level 3 writing classes at the beginning of 2006. While teaching a particular point one day, I found that more than one or two students stopped me to say that they hadn’t understood what I was talking about. On pressing them for more information, they told me that they could basically guess what I was talking about, but didn’t understand some of the words I had used. It is worth noting here, that this was a 900-level group of students and their English was at the high-intermediate level. They were keen learners, so it troubled them that they did not understand the vocabulary I had been using. As this was my most advanced group of students, in terms of English ability, I began to wonder how my other three classes were coping, as they were 600-level repeaters.

Academic language

Some discussion of academic language is useful here in order to define specifically what it is in the context of this project. In the literature, Academic Language has been broadly defined from two different perspectives. The first views language from a practical aspect as the language functions and structures used in the classroom. This can be further divided into discrete aspects of language, such as vocabulary, lexis, and syntax, on the one hand, and the sociolinguistic concept of using particular styles of language (or stylistic registers) to accomplish various academic tasks (Solomon & Rhodes, 1995). The second perspective found in the literature focuses on the distinction between academic language and conversational language. This idea comes largely from the work of J. Cummins (cited in Picard, 2006; Solomon &
Rhodes, 1995, and others), who called academic language Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, or CALP, and conversational language Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills, or BICS. For the purposes of this project, the term academic language is taken to mean the language used in instruction by the teacher, as well as formal language used in formal writing.

Method

The first step in response to my becoming aware that some of my students were not fully understanding what I was telling them, was to include in the very next lesson with each of my four classes a discussion of the difference between informal, or everyday English, and formal, or academic English. This served two purposes. The first was to review what they basically already knew about different language use and styles of writing, while the second was to make them more aware of the fact that their writing (at the university level) was, in fact, expected to be quite academic.

Having established this with my students, I also became very aware of the language I was using in my teaching. Was I using too much academic language? Should I adjust my language to cater to the learning background of these students? These, and many other questions, needed to be addressed.

In order to attempt to answer some of these questions, I needed to gather some data. I opted to record some of my lessons in the classroom, primarily to collect information on what I was saying as I was teaching. I had intentions of recording a lesson with each of my four classes, but I only recorded two in the end. I used a small hand-held Dictaphone cassette recorder, which was placed on the teacher’s desk at the front of the classroom. The recorder was switched off at times when students were working on tasks set for them. This ultimately gave me some 35 minutes of usable recorded
language, mainly of myself teaching a point, with some interaction and feedback from students.

**Findings**

The data from the first recording was of a class lesson in which the students were to write a letter to their future teacher. This was the ‘Final Guided Reflection’ component of students’ portfolios. This was my 900-level class and this was the first time any of them had written this particular letter. Before setting them to the task of doing the writing, my lesson plan included a brief review of work they had been doing recently with their portfolios on reflecting on their own writing, as well as general instructions for the letter. This also included general review of letter writing format. The first part of this went smoothly since most of the academic language associated with talking about portfolios had already been taught. When it came to review the layout of a letter, I asked students to tell me what words are used to start a letter and end a letter.

Me: “Now, to start a letter… when we start a letter, we usually begin with some specific words…”

S1: “Dear ESP teacher.”
S2: “Dear teacher.”

Me: “Yes… Dear (writing on the whiteboard) …whoever. This is called a salutation.”

S3: “What word, sir?”

Me: “A salutation. I’ll write it on the board… This is the formal word for this part of the letter.”

The lesson continued in similar manner as we discussed the close of the letter and the specific vocabulary to use – Yours sincerely, etc. Specific vocabulary was written up on the whiteboard. A handout with some notes on the format of a letter was given out before students set to the task of writing.
The second recording was of a lesson I gave one of my 600-level classes involving review and practice of writing about a line graph.

Me: “…now, before you write the report, let’s just do a quick review of the three key things we must have in the report. (Writing the numbers 1, 2 and 3 on the whiteboard) …OK, what’s the first thing we need?”

S1: “Introduction.”

Me: “That’s right. An introduction sentence (writing it beside number 1 on the board). And, what’s the second thing we must have?”

S2: “General sentence?”

Me: “Good. You’re partly right. What’s the correct name for this sentence? …can anyone remember?”

S3: “General trend.”

Me: “Right. General trend sentence (writing on the board), or overall trend sentence. Remember? This is the sentence where we talk about what is happening along the line …from beginning to end. You know, does it go up, or down, or…”

This class of students seemed to be struggling with the academic terms used to describe the functions, or parts, of report writing. They were not able to easily recall terms like ‘trend’, ‘or overall trend’. Indeed, some of them (on other occasions) had asked me, “What is ‘general’, sir?” It should be noted here that the recording above was made after several earlier lessons had been devoted to teaching the parts of a written report, including the formal language used to describe them. Students had also had the opportunity to look at example answers, as well as practice writing several of their own reports.
Reflection

The most important outcome of this project has been in my own personal development in becoming a better teacher. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, it has heightened an awareness of my students’ needs. If I had not become aware that many (or most?) of them were not understanding the deeper meaning and significance of the language needed in their courses, how could I help them to achieve their goal of passing? As Picard (2006) has noted, “…, there should be an overlap between the metalanguage used by students in their reflective essays and the metalanguage used for instruction in the texts.” I learned from this experience that more time and care was needed in teaching the formal aspects of the writing tasks required for students to complete this course.

As a direct result, I have begun to fine-tune my lesson plans, placing more emphasis on the use of formal language when it occurs. My main goal for my students is to increase their overall awareness of academic language in the university context. Further to this, I intend to incorporate more of the following ideas from a small selection of literature I read on the subject:

- Develop tasks that will raise students’ awareness of structure, organization of information, and informational flow; e.g. paragraph reconstruction, or paragraph completion exercises, examining cohesive devices by identifying them, or filling them in (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996:320).

- Increased use of visuals and demonstrations; the development of thinking and study skills; and the use of pre-reading and pre-writing activities (Short, 1994).

- Use activities that focus on using vocabulary in practical meaningful situations, repeating items frequently and encouraging the use of metalanguage and more formal synonyms (Picard, 2006).

- Be sensitive to the cognitive demands of the learning activities assigned to students; check frequently for comprehension; allow students, if necessary, to confer in or to use their first language to clarify concepts and to comprehend new vocabulary (Language and Culture Bulletin).
Conclusion

Academic language is indeed an important focus for teachers and students in courses at UGRU, UAE University. This is particularly important for the higher-level courses, although introducing the concept of academic language, or the differences between formal and informal English, is equally relevant in the lower levels. Although this project has merely touched on the issue of academic language in the classroom and there are many limitations in my work presented here, I feel the professional development aspect has been a success. It has made a positive contribution to my own thinking about the role of language in the classroom.
References


