

AN EXPLORATION OF PERCEPTIONS AND APPLICATIONS OF SPOKEN REGISTER: IRAQI STUDENTS AT A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

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DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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ABSTRACT

Register is a term used to describe how people use language to express different shades of meaning and thereby achieve a particular purpose or function within a particular social setting. In order to explain the processes involved in learning appropriate register, systemic functional linguists use three terms: field, tenor and mode.

Anecdotal evidence as well as a range of research studies suggests that misunderstandings between lecturers and university students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) occur frequently. This is particularly important in spoken language where the student does not have the time to check their errors and self-correct.

The literature suggests that register is often an issue for Arabic students studying in Western contexts, but most of it focuses on writing not speaking. As an Iraqi student myself, I wanted to see how spoken register affected Iraqi students studying in Australia. As an English teacher, I wanted to know how to teach academic register most appropriately to this cohort. Therefore, my PhD project focuses on a group of Iraqi students who studied a Masters in water management and agriculture at an Australian university. To help them with their English, they first attended English preparatory courses at the English Language Centre (called GEAP and PEP). Then they took some undergraduate disciplinary courses alongside a Bridging English course (BP) in preparation for their year of academic studies at a Masters level. I explore the three programs: The GEAP/PEP and the BP (English component) in terms of the application of register in the Programs and the students' perceptions and/or experiences of register while undertaking the programs.

In order to explore the students' perceptions of register, I analysed survey data (predominantly open-ended) from all 52 respondents and from follow up interviews with 15 of them which I thematically analysed using qualitative analysis software (NVivo10). For application, I analysed the publically available curriculum and materials used to teach the course using Critical Discourse Analysis. The reason for using this methodology was that it allowed me to focus on the specific linguistic choices, layout and structure of a text while at

the same time exploring the social and historical reasons for these choices (Janks 1997). I also used a thematic analysis of interview data from the Australian English teachers who taught these students in the various programs.

The student perception data revealed that the respondents strongly preferred the two English Language Centre courses the GEAP and more specifically the PEP because of their increasingly explicit focus on register for academic and non-academic purposes, the intercultural communication made possible by the different nationalities in the class and its practical discipline- appropriate activities. They criticised the BP because it was too long, focussed on Business English and therefore was inappropriate to their academic and disciplinary needs. Also, they did not like the fact that the cohort was only Iraqi students. An additional finding from the interview data was that mature-aged students have a particular need to take control of their own learning and become integrated within the learning and social environment.

The critical discourse analysis data and the interviews with the PEP teachers showed that the PEP curriculum had a progressive development of academic skills, genres and registers through tasks and interactions and this was spelt out explicitly in the PEP Student Handbook (the de facto curriculum for the course). The Handbook also revealed an active learning approach and an awareness of the role culture(s) play in developing academic and other registers. In the BP, on the other hand, there was less explicit information on genres, registers and cultures and the documentation mainly appears relevant to a different discipline (English within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) rather than the students' discipline of agriculture within the Faculty of Sciences.

This study suggests that in order to enhance academic register for EAL students, English courses need to be explicit, active and increasingly disciplinary and the students must be culturally integrated into the disciplines, university environment and local culture. This qualitative and interpretative study provides a rich and detailed description of the process of learning English and acquiring academic register and academic cultures. It is significant as it is the first study to focus on spoken register and the Iraqi cohort emerging from a conflict situation and relative isolation into a western academic environment.

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