

# Assessment as learning: Engaging students in academic literacy in their first semester

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*All assessment across the applied linguistics core courses at the University of South Australia was recently redesigned to respond to the academic literacy needs of all students in the major; this paper reports on the redesign of the assessment in the two courses normally taken by students in their first semester at university. Following a realisation that there was a need for all students (both native English speakers and others) to exit the major with appropriate academic literacy practices, the required practices were evaluated and 'divided up' between the assessment items in the different courses. Thus, the assessment items in one course focus on the development of essay writing and critical reading skills; in another on the analysis of data and the strong development of discipline-specific argumentation techniques. Importantly, these are developed in a way which is integrated with the discipline's body of knowledge and applied to students' specific areas of interest in the courses. Thus, by proceeding through the courses, the students acquire discipline specific knowledge, as well as academic literacy practices, through an integrated teaching and assessment approach.*

**Keywords:** *assessment, academic literacy, applied linguistics*

## Introduction

Recently, a decision was made by the team teaching the applied linguistics major at the University of South Australia to redesign the assessment across the core courses, to refocus in particular on the academic literacy of the students, both native English speakers and others. Academic literacy has a core role in the construction of knowledge in university settings, however, it is often ignored in teaching and assessment approaches, in favour of a narrower focus on content (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe 2004; Newman, Trenchs-Parera & Pujol 2003; Lea 1999; & Rex & McEachan 1999).

We evaluated the academic literacy practices, which we believed our students should have at the completion of the major (cf. Brown, Bull & Pendlebury 1997, p. 38) and then 'divided up' these practices between the assessment items across the core courses, a 'whole-of-program' approach (cf. Morgan, Dunn, Parry & O'Reilly 2004, p. 211-214). This paper reports on the first stage of the roll-out of this redesign, looking at the assessment in the two courses which most students undertaking the applied linguistics major study in their first semester at the university.

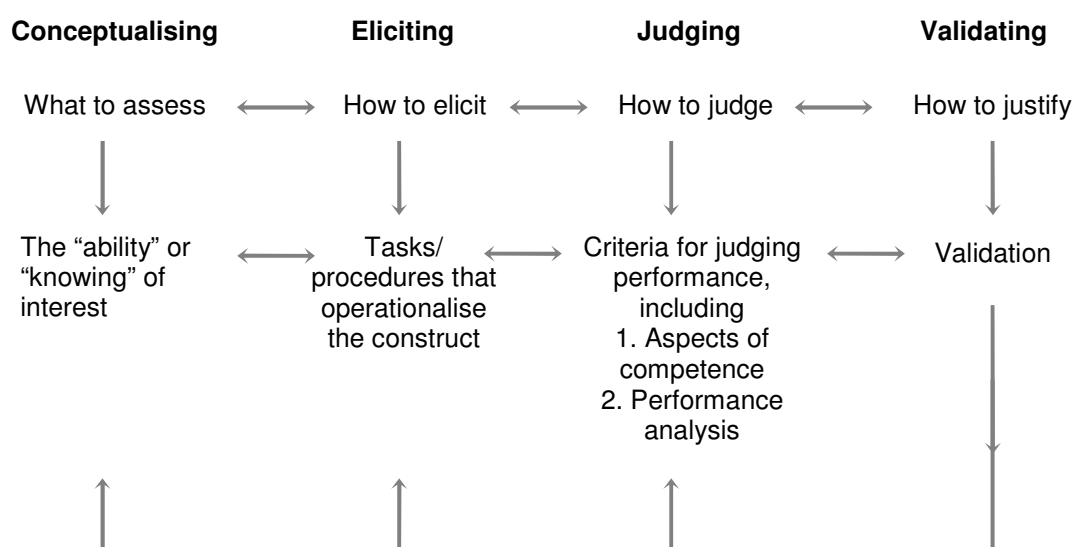
While a strong focus on academic literacy was behind the redesign of the assessment and this explicit focus is made clear to students, this is in no way divorced from discipline content (cf.

Moore & Hough 2007; Entwistle & Tait 1995). The assessment requires students to engage strongly with academic research articles (the majority of course readings, as textbooks are not used); they are expected not only to read and understand the content, but also to focus on such things as how the content is conveyed and the way in which the argumentation was structured. In coming to understand applied linguistics, students need to have not only ‘content’ knowledge, but to know discipline-specific ways of creating, transforming and reporting discipline knowledge, which cannot be taught, except together with the ‘content’ itself.

## Assessment and rethinking the applied linguistics assessment

In any reconsideration of an assessment approach, it is important to first consider what is involved in the processes of assessing. While most attention and thought is given to the process of elicitation in assessment — that is, to the tasks or assessment items — there is much more to assessment than the development of tasks. A more complete view of the assessment process encompasses the interrelated activities of conceptualising the construct to be assessed; eliciting knowledge or performance, judging students’ work and validating these judgements (see Table 1). While the focus of attention in assessment codes of practice is often purely on elicitation, conceptualisation in fact should lead assessment design, as a lack of clarity about the conceptualisation of what is being assessed has a direct impact on all other assessment processes.

**Table 1: A model of the assessment process (Liddicoat & Scarino in press)**



While the redesign of assessment involves all of the processes represented in Table 1, this paper will be concerned primarily with the processes of conceptualisation and eliciting, as these were fundamental to the process of redesigning assessment in the program described here. In order to integrate academic literacies in the redesign of the assessment for the applied linguistics program, then, we began by focusing on the learning which we wished students to achieve across the whole range of the core courses in the major and considering how these interrelated.

## Conceptualising academic literacy in applied linguistics

Academic literacy is an umbrella term for a number of diverse literacy practices, some of which are discipline specific and others cross-disciplinary. In redesigning assessment, it was first important to determine how academic literacy was to be understood in the context of an undergraduate applied linguistics program. The focus adopted was to identify what literacies applied linguistics staff expected their students to have on completing the program and how these literacies would be used in post-study contexts, whether these be academic or workplace contexts. It became clear that academic literacy was understood by the team in terms of developing the capacity of students to be consumers and producers of language-focused research and that academic literacy needed to be understood in terms of developing this capacity over the course of study. The key dimensions of academic literacy were then determined as being:

- Critical reading of research
- Analysis of research writing
- Synthesis of research from multiple sources
- Constructing an argument using the research of others
- Analysing language data
- Constructing an argument from language examples
- Understanding the process of research development
- Designing and implementing research projects
- Communicating research findings

In addressing these dimensions, it was immediately obvious that it was not possible for any single course to cover all of the literacies identified and that different courses would need to focus on different aspects of academic literacy in a sequenced manner. Undergraduate students in applied linguistics normally take two core courses in their first semester and these focus on different areas of applied linguistics: Introduction to the Study of Language being a descriptive linguistics course looking at semantics, morphology, syntax, phonetics and phonology, while Language and Culture focuses on areas such as language and culture, language and thought, pragmatics and discourse. It was decided that in their first semester, students would focus on critical reading, analysis, synthesis and constructing an argument using the research of others in the Language and Culture subject and on analysing language and argument from examples in the Introduction to the Study of Language subject. The remaining dimensions were taken up in subjects taught in the second semester of first year and in the second year.

## Implementation in Language and Culture

In conceptualising and then designing the new assessment for Language and Culture, it became clear that some of the previous assessment tasks did not have a clear link to either knowledge or its use. For example, there were reading tasks, but these consisted primarily of comprehension questions based on the weekly readings and had little purpose other than to make sure that students did the reading — essentially, the point of these tasks was for students to complete them and they had little connection to each other or larger themes. Equally, students had to do an oral presentation on one of the texts, but the purpose of this task was felt to be unclear, beyond perhaps an idea that some sort of oral presentation might be a good idea. The oral presentation was a simple rehearsal of information and boring for both tutor and students; the students had nothing in particular to say about the texts, because they had no

reason to say anything and no framework in which to develop ideas about the reading. This task was also hard to assess, as the development of reasonable assessment criteria becomes impossible if a task has no particular purpose.

The revised assessment plans in Language and Culture have reduced the diversity of task types and established greater coherence between the different assessment tasks, with clear links being set up between class teaching and learning and the assessment tasks. The tasks have been developed with a clear end-point in mind and each task contributes cumulatively towards that end-point. Importantly, as the assessment redesign has been conceptualised across the whole major in applied linguistics, the reduction of diversity in the tasks within this one course does not mean that students ‘miss out’ on certain academic literacies, as these are developed more strongly (and assessed) in other courses.

As noted above, the specific academic literacy focus in Language and Culture is on critical reading, analysing research writing, synthesising research from different sources and constructing an argument using the research of others. Each of these literacies is the focus of a separate assessment task, with the tasks combining the academic literacy focus and a content focus. While the separate tasks have a focus on separate academic literacies, each one develops students’ learning in a cumulative fashion. The various literacies are modelled in tutorials in the lead-up to the particular task.

The first task is a guided reading task based on a single research article, whose topic is naturally relevant to the course content. The emphasis is on identifying and analysing the arguments and evidence used in the article and abstracting information from across different components of the article. The second task is a focused essay-like response, based once again on a single research article. However in this task, students must use the research article to address a question which is not the focus of the article itself, with the essay topic being related to the reading, but not about the reading. Thus, students must locate and use information from the article for new purposes — knowledge transformation. This task requires the critical reading from the previous task as its starting point and develops it further. While each of the first two tasks relies on a single research article, the third task has an emphasis on synthesising arguments and evidence from multiple sources. It is a development from the previous task, as students once again must use research articles to address a question which is not the focus of any of the articles, but here they must synthesise the arguments and evidence from three different sources to produce a short essay-like response. Finally, students undertake a conventional essay, which requires them to locate sources of their own. The development of the essay requires the students to read their sources critically (Task 1) transform the knowledge from those sources for their own specific purposes (Task 2) and integrate the different sources together in a coherent way to advance their argument (Task 3).

## **Implementation in Introduction to the Study of Language**

The course Introduction to the Study of Language has a much stronger focus on micro-analysis of language data than Language and Culture and this is reflected in the academic literacies which were embedded in the redesigned assessment — analysing language data and constructing an argument based on language examples. Consequently, in the redesign of the assessment, those elements of the previous assessment scheme which specifically required students to find and analyse research literature were removed in the new assessment; while these are vital skills in applied linguistics, the focus on the use of research literature in the companion course Language and Culture, meant that the development and assessment of

these skills could be left out of this course, in order to focus more strongly on the two specific academic literacies which were to be embedded.

This is not to suggest that students are not exposed to research literature during this course. The course has a reader which consists largely of academic research articles, with only two or three more textbook-like readings. The content of the research articles is naturally important in the course, but time in the tutorials is also dedicated to examining the structure and argumentation of the articles. The articles themselves were carefully chosen, as all give strong models for students to follow in terms of the way in which specific, detailed language data is used to enable and justify a particular linguistic analysis. The research articles are thus vital in the course and in the development of academic literacy, but students do not analyse the articles as in the course *Language and Culture*, rather, they use them as models for their own work (and, of course, for the discipline content).

The course content in *Introduction to the Study of Language* falls into three quite separate modules, with one focusing on linguistic meaning, one on ‘grammar’ (morphology and syntax) and one on the sound system of languages. As each of these three areas uses different techniques of analysis, students undertake three separate language analysis tasks through the course, one on each module. However, while the techniques are different, the separate tasks are assessed using the same criteria, with a strong focus on treating the data as the unit for analysis and with the analysis needing to be necessarily justified purely on the basis of the data presented.

In the redesign of the assessment, a previous ‘conventional’ essay — students pick a topic, find some literature and use it to justify their argument — was removed from this course and replaced with a ‘data analysis and justification’ essay. As noted above, one of the academic literacies which applied linguistics students need to develop is that of constructing an argument based on language data and while this is implicit in the language analysis tasks, we considered that it was important for this literacy to be the specific focus of an assessment task.

The redesigned essay is undertaken by students’ half-way through the course. The general structure of the essay has been modelled by the previous six or seven research readings (as well as being explicitly discussed). The students choose which of seven or eight languages they will focus on — most students in the course are studying a language and so students generally focus on the language they are studying, allowing them a greater engagement with the material — and are given 30–40 sentences from that language. There is an associated question, which requires them as an initial stage to analyse the data, similar to the language analysis tasks. However, the data is selected so that there is a choice, with (at least) two competing analyses possible, each having advantages and disadvantages. Students are told that there are competing analyses, all of which are supported by some linguists (with references, where appropriate). In their essay, they need to argue for a particular analysis, based on the data which has been presented to them. They are explicitly told that there is no ‘right’ answer, that some evidence suggests one analysis and some another and that the important (and assessable) thing is that they justify on the basis of the data, why they believe that their particular analysis is superior to alternative analyses.

## **Conclusions**

When redesigning assessment, it is important to consider not just the assessment tasks themselves, but to begin from a point of what you want students to learn. In redesigning our

applied linguistics assessment to have a strong focus on academic literacy, we looked at the learnings we wished to see across the whole range of courses in the major, enabling a more specific focus on particular academic literacies in different courses. Importantly, the focus on academic literacy did not lessen the focus on discipline-specific content, with the two being closely integrated — for example, students read research articles to see the content, but also how the content was justified and expressed in discipline-specific ways.

The assessment tasks described here all engage students with professional research literature, with each academic literacy skill intended to develop the capacity of students to be consumers and producers of language-focused research; that is, the practices developed and assessed are those which are used in academic and workplace contexts by applied linguists.

What were the outcomes of this assessment redesign? At this stage, with these students only having completed their first semester at university, it is unclear what the long-term development outcomes will be. However, in one of the courses (Language and Culture), students were asked if the course helped them to “feel more confident in dealing with reading linguistics research” and if the course helped “develop your understanding of the types of writing required in linguistics”. The answers to both of these were a resounding ‘yes’, with specific comments such as “I came into the course with little knowledge on reading linguistics research and now I feel as if I can read research papers confidently” and “I went back over the first reading of the course and I discovered that I could actually understand what the article was trying to say, whereas before, I had much trouble understanding”. This suggests that the students themselves feel that the academic literacy focus has assisted them, but has also had a strong impact on the assessable work itself.

The staff assessing Language and Culture also found that a student’s performance on the final essay task typically increases the student’s overall mark rather than bringing the mark down, as it had in previous years. In the Introduction to the Study of Language course, no evaluation focused on the academic literacy, however several of the essays produced in this course after only 8 weeks could easily have been accepted for publication in the very journals from which course readings were selected, had they been based on data which was not already well analysed.

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