ACCESS THE WORD – ACCESS THE WORLD

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Abstract

For success at university, students need to develop academic literacy, which means learning a set of behaviours appropriate to academe. One of the most important of these is mastery of academic language.

Changes in the South African socio-political context have brought about much needed changes in education and with the demand for equity and redress, students are now entering university from a wide variety of educational and language backgrounds. This is not a unique phenomenon in universities around the world but, as we have *eleven* official languages in South Africa, English, the medium of instruction and assessment, is often not only the second but the third language for very many students.

A very high percentage of academic words have their roots in words of Latin or Greek origin, languages to which few students have had exposure and they find themselves underprepared to cope with this highly specialized academic discourse. In order to enhance students' academic vocabulary, which in turn provides a solid foundation for competence in reading and writing academic discourse, I present a course called Word Power. By its very nature this course requires rote learning of roots of words, constant practice and reinforcement.

Using the computer programme, Question Mark Designer for Windows, I have developed material for use as tutorials and for revision exercises. This CAA method is used as a support for the lectures and is intended to take the boring element out of the drill sessions, which are at the core of any vocabulary building course. Students can use the revision exercises to work at their own pace and receive instant feedback and assessment of their progress. In addition it removes the necessity of having several tutors and alleviates the burden of marking. Although this computer material was only available to the students this semester, I have had positive results

from its use and positive feedback from the students and I feel confident that it will continue to be an enormous benefit to my students in helping them to master academic language. Accessing the word is a step to accessing the academic world.

Keywords

As a lecturer in the Department of Classics at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, I cannot claim expertise in the workings of computers or of computer programmes. My interest is in language and in improving the language skills of students who come to the university underprepared for the linguistic demands of academe. To this end, I have recently developed material, using Question Mark Designer for Windows, which has proved to be a valuable learning support for my students.

In post-apartheid South Africa, we have eleven official languages and an official language policy which actively promotes multilingualism. Paradoxically, while being multilingual is an advantage in many ways in our society, at the University of Cape Town, English is the language of instruction, academic enquiry and assessment. For many students English is their second, if not their third language. Added to this is the fact that "the language of academia is a very specialized discourse which presents a problem for all students," (Angelil-Carter,1993: 8). Stubbs (1990) supports this view, arguing that a high value is placed on the language in which that knowledge is construed and those who cannot gain command of it remain outsiders. He stresses that the Western educational system is "thoroughly verbal and textual" (ibid: 558) and that written texts and writing have always been central to the educational system. However, in South Africa, the educational experience of many of the historically disadvantaged community was (and for some, continues to be) very poor, with very little training in the formal register of English which remains a requirement at university. From the legacy of political apartheid there has emerged, in a sense, linguistic apartheid. Ironically, the very people who were oppressed under the old apartheid system, with its concomitant political, racial and educational discrimination, are the ones who are at risk of experiencing a subtle though different form of discrimination which will have a material impact on their lives in terms of future employment and success. Allowing previously disadvantaged students access to university is one thing, but we must also provide them with the necessary tools to succeed in the academic environment. Academic development programmes endevour to do just that by concentrating on text-literacy, which Gee (1990:67) defines as that which has its emphasis on syntactic mode and explicitness, on essay-writing skills, and on constructing academic argument. These are skills which can usefully be taught explicitly but they proceed on the assumption that "students have an intermediate to advanced level of competence in the English language" (Thesen et al. 1997:6). The socio-political context of South Africa has changed but

the language problem has not.This has offered the challenge to language practitioners to find creative ways to help students who have inadequate lexical resources to cope with the reading, writing and understanding of academic discourse.

Cummins (1984: 27) points out that academic *writing* relies on "linguistic cues to meaning and thus successful interpretation of the message depends heavily on knowledge of the language itself" An investigation was done by Laufer (1992) on how much lexis is necessary for *reading* comprehension in a second language and she found that in the interpretation of texts learners relied on word meaning first, then on knowledge and least of all on syntax. She claims that the nature of the reading threshold is largely lexical and that reading at an academic level requires 95% lexical coverage, that is, the knowledge of 95% of word tokens in any given text. It can be argued that students can get by with less than that. As a strategy to deciphering an academic text which contains a number of unfamiliar words and concepts, students may skip over these words and rely upon context to give clues to meaning. However, a poor vocabulary compounds the difficulties experienced by students for whom English is an additional language. It is my contention then that accessing word meaning in an academic context is empowering and is an important way for students to become insiders in the academic world.

In an effort to assist students to enhance their understanding and use of academic language, etymology courses have been developed in many universities, focusing on words of Latin and Greek origin, since, according to Luschnig (1982), over 60% of all English words have Latin or Greek roots, and in the vocabulary of the sciences and technology this figure rises to almost 90%. I have developed such a course at the University of Cape Town, called **Word Power** . When I first introduced the course, in only the first semester, in 1997, 47 students enrolled, of which approximately half did not have English as their mother tongue. This course has grown in popularity and is now offered in once in the first semester and at two different times in the second semester, with a total enrolment of 194 last year. The number of second language speakers has risen to approximately 65%. This year looks set to repeat that pattern, with an enrolment of 67 in the first semester. The increase in enrolments, coupled with feedback from student course evaluations, is indicative that the students have perceived the need to improve their understanding and use of academic language. last year. This increase in numbers, however, has had consequences in two areas: firstly, as the sole lecturer, tutor and marker, the marking of tutorials and tests became very time-consuming, and secondly, it became more difficult to actively engage all the students in vocabulary-enriching exercises, word analysis exercises and drill. In a course of this kind such exercises are of seminal importance. Traditionally, with the smaller classes I could use the interactive method of teaching and I could set and mark many practice assignments. Now this is more difficult, and the weaker students, who are being taught a new type of language in a language which is not their home language, are once again at a disadvantage – the very reason for which the course was introduced is being thwarted by its perceived benefits!

 As our tight financial budget would not allow for employing extra tutors for small group practice/tutorial sessions, I had to think of alternatives, given last year's large

numbers. Enter computers! With the help of the leader of the Technology Assisted Testing (TAT) programme at the University of Cape Town, Ken Masters, I have recently integrated computer assisted tutorials and revision exercises as a support to the core lectures and as a means of continuous assessment. I can plot the students' progress via the results of the tutorials and the students can be aware of their own progress via the revision exercises which they do voluntarily and at times suitable to them.

The software programme which I used was Question Mark Designer for Windows. I chose this on the advice of Ken Masters for these reasons: he knows that I am not technologically minded and therefore needed an easy to use package (the simpler, the better) which precluded Quest, and, although he would have liked me to use Question Mark Perception, at this stage it is not a supported product at our university. I shall not dwell on the technicalities of the programme – suffice it to say that even I managed to use it, and, if I have problems, the IT department and TAT are only too willing to help. I would like to explain how I have used it. Thus far, I have only used the programme to create tutorials and revision exercises with feedback boxes, not for official testing. The reason for this is that the vocabulary is learned incrementally, that is, approximately 45 Latin or Greek word roots per week, which themselves produce hundreds of derivatives in English. I have devised exercises and tutorials which complement my lecturing schedule. To use the shuffling or random selecting of questions to deliver a test, however, would be impossible as students would not have met many of the words. The only way around this, I think, would be to make a very large library of questions reflecting *each* stage of the vocabulary acquisition, from which I could then give the instruction to shuffle and randomly select. I am not ready for this yet.

For students in my course, the aim of the tutorial and revision exercises is vocabulary enrichment. While the lectures deal with the histories of certain Latin and Greek based words, embedding them in disciplines such as Philosophy, Psychology, Literature, Commerce and Medicine, the students need as much practice as possible in recognising, understanding and using words. This kind of drill can be boring for students and so I had to use a variety of exercises to keep the students interested and motivated to learn the words.

Question Mark Designer offers several ways in which questions can be asked, of which I used the following:

- multiple choice questions, where the student answers by selecting one choice from several options. It is time consuming to construct good questions which go beyond the simple recall type question, but it is possible and certainly worthwhile.
- text questions, where the student answers by typing in some text, or by filling in gaps in some existing text. Incorrect spelling of an answer disadvantages the student, but since the course focuses on words themselves, students must learn to spell correctly, and so another spin-off from this computer assisted approach is an awareness of the importance of correct spelling – a discipline in itself.
- selection questions, where a series of statements are presented and the student can select the answer from a number of items. These statements can also be presented as true/false or yes/no answers. Again a lot of care is required in

constructing these questions so that they draw on knowledge learned in the lectures rather than allow for guesswork.
- synonyms and antonyms which require a true/false answer. Although guesswork cannot be eliminated these are interesting exercises because they encourage the students to contemplate what the Latin or Greek based word really means before they decide on an answer.

Although one cannot eliminate the 'guessing factor' when students answer Multiple Choice type questions in an assessment exercise, I have tried, in the tutorial/revision exercises, to ensure that the students are always engaged in the learning process and that these exercises have some academic credibility and are not merely recall exercises. I give feedback messages after each question. If the correct answer is chosen, I sometimes (not always) give explanations as to why the other choices are wrong, and, if the wrong answer is given, I give an explanation or detail about the correct word. The one negative feature here is that the feedback box often covers part of the original question. I would like both the question and then the feedback answer to be fully visible at the same time so that the students remain aware of the question which was asked. Otherwise the answer appears *in vacuo* and could lose its impact.

As I only included this CAA approach in my course design in the second quarter of this year, I used two control groups to evaluate the efficacy of this approach. After the first test, at the end of the first quarter, I selected 20 students who achieved poor results. I divided these into two groups. Group 1 was allowed access to the Language laboratory every week (for a four week period) to do extra exercises (as many as they liked) as revision and to reinforce new work which was introduced in the lectures. Group 2 did not have this facility. Each group had 7 students for whom English is an additional language. It is interesting to note that even English mother tongue speakers experience difficulty with academic language, with 3 in each group. The results of the test which all the students wrote at the end of the second quarter showed that the students in Group 1 performed significantly better in the second test (20,4%), while the students in Group 2 showed only slight improvement (9,3%).

Group 1 Student	Test 1	Test 2	Difference	Group 2 Student	Test 1	Test 2	Difference
A	30	54	24	A	53	43	-10
B	59	65	6	B	54	59	5
C	45	83	38	C	38	49	11
D	48	73	25	D	40	57	17
E	47	58	11	E	41	64	23
F	53	60	7	F	37	47	10
G	53	75	22	G	37	50	13
H	46	53	7	H	45	49	4
I	28	71	43	I	52	61	9
J	57	78	21	J	32	43	11
Average	46.6	67	20.4	Average	42.9	52.2	9.3

Group 1 Tests

Group 2 Tests
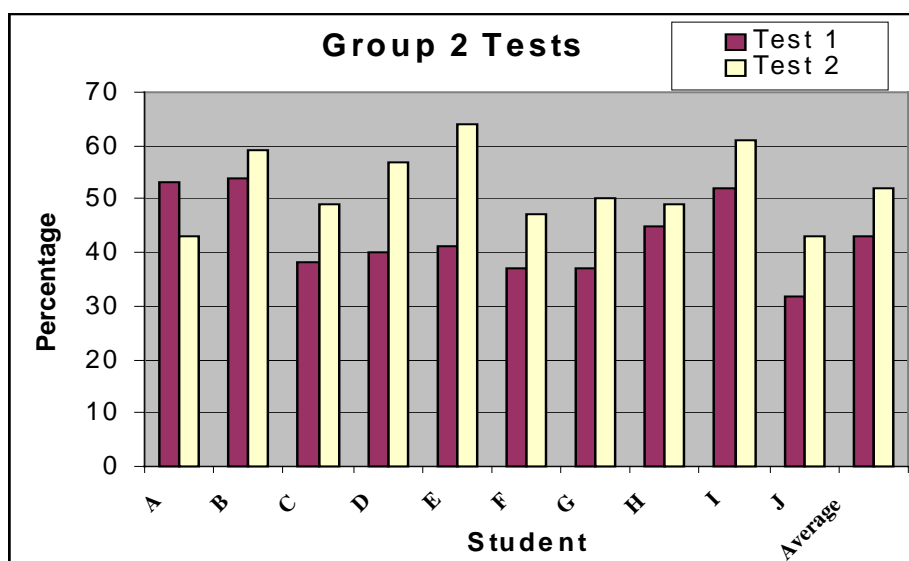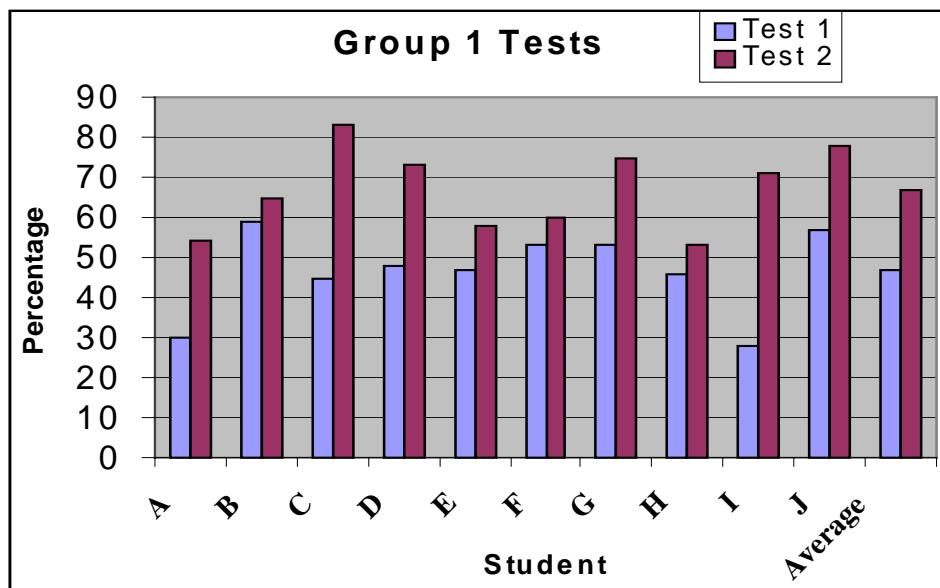
For me, the aim of using CAA was to give students more opportunity to practise vocabulary exercises in an unpressured environment, to enable them to get instant feedback and, above all to make the learning fun. Even for students who were not experienced in using computers, the Question Mark package was easy to use. I gave out a questionnaire to those students who used the computer revision exercises, to elicit their responses about the use of computer-based assistance.

The questions were as follows:

Home Language: **5 African language speakers**
3 English speakers

2 Chinese speakers

Please circle the answer which you feel is the most suitable response:

a) I am skilled in using the computer:

not at all **(0)**
a little **(5)**
a lot **(3)**
to a great degree **(2)**

b) I enjoyed using the computer for revision exercises:

not at all **(0)**
a little **(2)**
a lot **(6)**
to a great degree **(2)**

c) I feel that my vocabulary has improved as a result:

not at all **(0)**
a little **(1)**
a lot **(7)**
to a great degree **(2)**

d) I found the exercises boring:

not at all **(7)**
a little **(3)**
a lot **(0)**
to a great degree **(0)**

e) I would like greater variation in the type of exercises:

not at all **(2)**
a little **(6)**
a lot **(2)**
to a great degree **(0)**

f) the exercises reinforced words and ideas covered in lectures:

not at all **(0)**
a little **(2)**
a lot **(7)**
to a great degree **(1)**

g) I visited the language laboratory:

not at all **(0)**
a little **(2)**
a lot **(8)**

h) I found the instructions difficult to follow:

not at all **(9)**
a little **(1)**
very **(0)**
to a great degree **(0)**

i) I liked the feedback:

not at all **(1)**
a little **(7)**
a lot **(2)**
to a great degree **(0)**

My decision to use CAA was based on my desire to find an effective way to assist my students to become competent in reading and writing academic language, the basis of which is understanding academic vocabulary; it is about empowering students; it is about word power. In the words of linguist, Martha Demientieff (in Angelil-Carter, 1992):

> *Contrary to some views that exposure to the dominant culture gives one an advantage in learning, in my opinion it is ownership of words that gives one confidence. I must want the word, enjoy the word and use the word to own it. When the new word becomes synonymous in my head as well as externally, then I can think with it."*

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