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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Language, literacies and learning in the disciplines: A higher education perspective

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The seminar, organised by Doris Dippold, Marion Heron and Karen Gravett from the University of Surrey, brought together researchers and education practitioners from across the world to discuss emerging issues in how language shapes higher education practices.

The seminar was held online due to the Coronavirus pandemic and we had more than 100 registered participants, approximately 60 of which attended over the two days of the seminar. The programme was designed to maximise engagement and participation during the seminar. Seminar presenters submitted an artefact (e.g. a presentation, a poster, a PowerPoint) outlining their contribution before the seminar. On the seminar days, there were three plenary talks, three interactive workshops and four presentation sessions during which presenters gave five-minute outlines of their contributions before discussions started.

1. Day 1

Day 1 started with a presentation by the first keynote speaker, Dr. Bee Bond (University of Leeds) author of the book *Making language visible in higher education*: *English for Academic Purposes and internationalisation* (2020, Multilingual Matters). Bee spoke about the 'visibility' (or sometimes invisibility) of language in Higher Education (HE), arguing that language and academic discourses are closely interwoven within the teaching of disciplinary knowledge.

The first presenter session explored these ideas further. Centered around the theme of disciplinary and language collaboration, three groups of speakers talked about different initiatives of raising the profile of language beyond in-sessional and pre-sessional courses, integrate a focus on language in disciplinary study and enhance collaboration between language/English for Academic Purposes (EAP) professionals and tutors in the disciplines. An interesting debate emerged out of this session: is collaboration between colleagues in the disciplines and those specialising in language and language support best facilitated through top-down approaches by which universities, for example, mandate a certain level of language proficiency and put structures in place to support language development beyond pre-sessional and in-sessional support? Or should we be working 'bottom-up', using small initiatives to make big change? Throughout the seminar, the latter idea was recurringly referred to as 'guerilla gardening', an evocative concept that informed our ongoing thinking and discussion.

After a break, the seminar returned with a workshop. Facilitated by Dr. Karen Gravett (University of Surrey) and Ph.D. student Claire Seller (University of Surrey), the group discussed the meaning of the term 'literacies' within higher education contexts. It became clear during the session that the term has multiple meanings, encompassing, for example, feedback and assessment literacies, digital literacies, sociomaterial literacies, and also oracy (speaking). Karen and Claire also discussed the notion of 'lockdown' literacies to describe new ways of being and working in the Covid 19 crisis.

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The second presenter session explored the connection of language and disciplinary learning. Presenters spoke about language in the context of dentistry, design and science learning. It became clear through these sessions how important an awareness of language is in all higher education practices. For example, when we include words such as 'clarity' in assessment criteria, what meaning is actually attached to the term? How do metaphors used by teachers contribute to knowledge creation? What lexical knowledge is necessary to understand academic texts from the field of dentistry?

Day 1 concluded with a workshop led by Dr. Doris Dippold (University of Surrey) and Ph.D. student Adeeba Ahmad (University of Surrey). This workshop focused further on the topic of learning and teaching in the disciplines through a language and literacy perspective. In breakout rooms, participants discussed four 'talking points' that were deliberately controversial, for example, 'Language should be an assessment rubric in all disciplinary assessment'. Participants' discussion of these talking points reflected again the earlier debate about bottom-up vsersus top-down approaches to making language more visible in higher education.

2. Day 2

Day 2 started with the second plenary talk from Dr. Francesca Arrigoni (Kingston University, UK) who talked about developing Pharmacology students' critical thinking through a dialogic teaching approach. Fran highlighted the importance of students' ability to think critically in STEM subjects, such as inferring and reasoning from data, but noted that students sometimes struggled to articulate their ideas clearly and appropriately. The Covid-19 pandemic and the move to online teaching has proved to be a challenge to teaching these critical thinking skills. Fran shared her experiences of motivating students to engage in critical thinking skills activities through a teaching approach that values dialogue in a safe and respectful online environment. Students were encouraged to participate online through whiteboard activities, use of a number of critical thinking activities, meaningful and personal connections and the opportunity to discuss, deliberate and argue in a non-threatening and fun environment. The key message of the plenary was that science students who will often operate in interdisciplinary contexts need to have the skills (including language) to be able to create ideas and challenge assumptions. This can be achieved through a dialogic teaching approach that values critical thinking skills.

The morning plenary was followed by the third presentation strand on the theme of evolving perspectives in language and literacies. The strand included four presentation slots on topics that covered different ways of developing language and literacy in diverse contexts such as multilingual writers, EAP students and academic colleagues. The key theme that arose from the discussions generated by the sessions was recognising, acknowledging and building on personal trajectories and experiences in language and literacy development. The third workshop, facilitated by Dr. Marion Heron (University of Surrey) and two Ph.D. students, Beyza Ucar and Hanaa Alghamdi (University of Surrey), was centred around the theme of language, literacy and teacher education. The aim of the workshop was to bring together ideas and experiences on raising awareness across the disciplines on the centrality of language and literacies to developing disciplinary understanding. In breakout rooms, participants shared the opportunities (or not) for embedding elements of language awareness into teacher education activities such as PGCert. The discussion at the end of the workshop pointed to the need for both institutional policies to incorporate elements of language awareness but also for all participants to take small steps in their institution to promote language awareness. The workshop concluded with a number of suggestions, written up into 'pledges' of how each participant will start to make these small steps in their institution.

The workshop was followed by the final presentation strand that focused on the theme of language, literacies and equality of participation. Attitudes to students' spoken and written language was highlighted and the notions of standard, non-standard, formal and informal register was unpacked. The final plenary talk was given by Dr. Lisa McGrath (Sheffield Hallam University). Lisa explored subject specialists' commitment and capacity to develop their students' academic and professional literacies.

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Lisa talked about two projects in which she has worked with disciplinary tutors from across the university to raise awareness of genre. The first project involved developing a metacognitive scaffold to help make tutors' tacit knowledge of academic and professional literacies explicit. The second project goes one step further and involves supporting lecturers' to develop the skills expertise to develop students' professional and academic literacies. A key theme from the presentation, and supported by much of the discussion emerging from other sessions, was that disciplinary tutors are well-placed to support the development of students' professional and academic literacies but need themselves to be supported in doing this due to perhaps tacit knowledge of unfamiliar concepts.

The two-day seminar concluded with final words from Dr. Doris Dippold on key themes developed over the two days, the concerns and challenges, as well as the way forward. Feedback from the participants has clearly pointed to an enthusiasm and interest in maintaining momentum by forming reading groups and special interest groups. Furthermore, a number of participants articulated their pledges to actively advocate for language and literacy awareness amongst staff across their own institutions.

3. Conclusion and implications for applied linguistics

The objective of this two-day seminar was to get language 'on the map' in higher education research and pedagogy when mainstream HE journals generally neglect it, and to reach out beyond the language disciplines to teachers and practitioners in the academic disciplines. This latter goal was not quite reached, as the vast majority of the participants in the seminar represented subjects affiliated with language study/linguistics/EAP. We will, in the future, think of further ways of reaching out to the wider HE community, for example through subject-specific pedagogic journals, or special issue proposals. Our Language, Literacies and Learning Research Group at the University of Surrey, in which over 20 members of staff and Ph.D. students are members, will also think about further ways of engaging with the wider community.

Participants were asked to articulate how they would disseminate the content and ideas from the seminar at their institution and these include:

- Connecting language and literacies to key institutional strategic objectives
- Taking on more 'lecturer-facing' roles and providing workshops
- Collaborating with subject specialists in both teaching and curriculum design
- Writing blogs and papers
- Disseminating ideas at cross-institutional meetings

One of the key aims of the seminar was to encourage participation and knowledge sharing between language specialists and subject specialists. Whilst the number of disciplinary lecturers attending the seminar was less than we had hoped, the diverse ways in which participants plan to engage with the wider institution to ensure language and literacies gain a prominent place on the teaching and research agenda is testament to the fruitful discussions held over the two days. The emphasis in all discussions was on practical implications and small but bold steps to, to misquote the title of Bee's book, make language and literacies visible in higher education. A further aim of the seminar was to develop links and networks for future research, practice and other collaborations. A large number of participants were interested in following up some of the commitments made over the two days and so we very much look forward to developing further ideas and making an impact in our own institutions.

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