J Œ F 0 Cf co uqp<*Academic Competence. Theory and Classroom Practice: Preparing ESL Students for Content Courses.*

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A great many language courses are justified by claims that they ready students to be successful in some sort of academic context. In some cases, students may be told that they will be able to read bibliography in their specialty; in others, that they will be able to take part in mainstream educational programs that require them to know the second language well. The upstart is that, one way or another, all these courses have to do with teaching people to be academically competent. With this relatively short book, H.D. Adamson has made a very valuable contribution to helping language teachers deal with academic competence as part of their teaching. Although the book deals only with ESL teaching in US educational contexts, I feel it can be useful to teachers of other languages and in other contexts. It should also be of interest to teacher educators.

The style and organization of the book are very teacherly and leave the impression that it was designed to be the principal textbook in, for instance, a graduate course. Adamson covers the three things that teachers need to understand an educational proposal; that is, a theoretical base, a classroom research model, and practical guidelines. To me, it is the research base that gives life to the book because it clearly shows real students and teachers in a variety of concrete situations. The book's theoretical parts may be difficult for some readers to follow without further explanations; the practical suggestions are, like all lists of possible activities, very interesting but somewhat unsatisfying.

By way of justifying the entire work, Adamson points out in his introduction that research has consistently shown that many ESL students have more than a little difficulty in content courses, which leads to the conclusion that the ESL courses they take tend not to prepare them adequately for the mainstream. He suggests

> that the main reason for this failure is that ESL programs are usually isolated from mainstream programs; ... that before students leave the ESL program, they should have some access to [the] real academic environment [of the school] while they still have the support of their ESL teachers and peers. In other words, I suggest that the walls surrounding the ESL program need to be broken down (p. xii).

In Chapter 1, "Introduction: ESL Students in Content Courses," Adamson introduces the notion of academic competence, citing Saville-Troike's (1984) study, and notes the fact that she did not define the term (although she did give some concrete guidelines). He sums up by saying

> Saville-Troike's conclusions about what ESL students need [in order] to succeed in content courses are different from what many teachers had imagined. We had thought that the most important factors in academic success were general language proficiency and sociolinguistic competence. But Saville-Troike showed that specifically academic factors are necessary as well, and she introduced the term *academic competence* to include these factors (p. 4).

This chapter ends with Case Study 1 (by Meiko Koike) which has to do with a seventh-grade immigrant student who showed clear signs of culture shock. The case is a classic example of the ESL student who does poorly in a mainstream class in part because of her weaknesses in the language of instruction, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because of her lack of experience with particular subject matter, as well as a general lack of academic competence.

Chapter 2, "Theories of Language and Language Proficiency," is a 34-page *tour de force*. The historical overview it gives is useful because it shows the roots of Adamson's own thinking and explains the two linguistic cornerstones of his concept of academic competence: Spolsky's (1989) Preference Model of language proficiency and Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle in interaction. The first is important to Adamson because it opens the possibility of conceptualizing language proficiency as something that varies in nature and degree from individual to individual and from context to context; the second, because it states that there is an underlying, quite possibly universal human drive to communicate, even when there is no shared system at the code level.

Chapter 3, "Theories of Understanding," is an overview that underwrites the pedagogical aspects of Adamson's idea of academic competence, to which he adds two more cornerstones: schema theory, which is a necessary postulate of the Cooperative Principle and a way of explaining why and how both background knowledge and scripts, particularly "scripts for school," relate to academic competence; and, after a lengthy discussion, experiential realism (Johnson, 1987) which, he believes, "provides an epistemology that is compatible with effective ways of teaching language, at both the introductory and advanced levels" (p. 67). The upper face, so to speak, of this latter cornerstone is Carrell, Devine & Eskey's (1988) interactive model of reading, which allows for both bottom-up and top-down processing, depending on circumstances.

It should be noted that these two rather dense, wide-ranging and highly theoretical chapters reflect Adamson's conviction that

> A discussion of these [fundamental philosophical] issues is important for second language scholarship because it can clarify how the discipline fits

into the larger framework of psychological and philosophical inquiry. The ESL field needs a philosophical underpinning that is consistent with what we know about how students acquire language, understand academic material, and accommodate to a new culture. [Furthermore,] insights from language teaching can shed light on these issues. Language teachers deal with questions of meaning and understanding in a practical way every day, and in the history of science it has often been the case that the working knowledge of practitioners has contributed to theory (p. 51).

Chapter 4, "Case Studies of ESL Students in Content Courses," is really two chapters in one. Its overall purpose is to show what ESL students actually do in these courses and to give a trove of examples; however, the case studies are of two very different kinds. The chapter opens with the description of a project to gather observational data on several ESL students and reports on two very different individuals who were subjects in that project (as was the subject of the first case study). It ends with the description of a college-level "precourse" that Adamson himself, with two colleagues, gave to eighteen college-level ESL students during the fifth, sixth and seventh weeks of a particular semester.

The subjects of the research project were thirty-four non-native speakers of English enrolled in a wide range of content courses, ten of whom were in college, and twenty-four, in grades seven through twelve. The study was exploratory and qualitative; the research question was "How do ESL students accomplish academic tasks in content courses?" The provisional list of academic tasks included reading, note-taking, studying for tests, taking tests, writing papers, participating in class, and using reference tools. Research and analysis procedures are very usefully described in detail.

Of the two case studies reported, the first is the more multithematic. It has to do with a male, 17-year-old high school student who was the only non-native enrolled in this particular US History course. The researcher, Elizabeth Schepps, reports that the student's note-taking technique consisted largely of copying verbatim with little understanding; that he was more successful when he got peer-tutoring; that he was more successful when his background knowledge or interest was higher; and finally that he found multiple-choice and matching tests very difficult, but was quite successful on essay questions. Interestingly, the researcher comments that the tests "are a good indication of [the student's] English ability but are not a clear indication of how much history he knows" (p. 78). The second case study reported in this chapter has to do with a very well educated, 46-year-old, male refugee. The report, by Dianna Poodiack, centers on the student's deep-rooted conflicts with the style and expectations of US education. Few other aspects of the subject's academic strategies are reported.

In "General Findings of the Case Studies," Adamson deals with six areas of interest: Reading, Dictionary Use, Note-Taking, Organization, Speaking in Class, and Coping Strategies. He (like possibly everybody else) deems reading to be the most important academic skill and reports that the best reader read, summarized and then reread material

until he grasped a topic, which meant that he spent an inordinate amount of time on even a simple assignment. By "organization" Adamson seems to mean both keeping notes and so forth in order, and diligence; that is, organizing both study materials and time. The more successful students were well organized and neat; however, diligence did not always lead to even minimal understanding, although it does seem to have led to good grades and praise from teachers.

To cope is to do things in such a way as to survive (psychologically). In a way, coping strategies are acts of desperation, and Adamson invariably gives them a negative connotation. Although he admits that such mechanical techniques as copying and rote memorization can lead to learning, he also points out that there is no guarantee they will.

Adamson draws three general conclusions from the case studies: (1) The subjects' approach to academic tasks was influenced by (a) their own academic backgrounds and cultures, (b) their individual learning styles and (c) the nature of assignments. All of them found their academic work very difficult and those who succeeded did so by devoting a lot of time and energy to their studies. (2) Some of the subjects' academic strategies were more effective than others; however, virtually all subjects needed explicit academic skills instruction that might have shown them how to use limited resources to accomplish academic assignments most effectively. And (3),

> perhaps the most important finding of the study is that when students are faced with material that is beyond their ability to comprehend, they develop ways of completing their assignments without understanding them, thus concealing their lack of understanding from the teacher (p. 95).

The second part of Chapter 4 has to do with a "precourse" in which academic strategies were taught directly. The term is Adamson's. A precourse combines aspects of what Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989) call "theme-based courses" and what the same authors call "adjunct courses". In a precourse "students enrolled in a theme-based [ESL] course join a regular content course for less than a full semester and are tutored in the content subject and in academic strategies by their ESL teachers" (p. 96). The precourse dealt with the LI and L2 acquisition part of a broader Introduction to Linguistics course; Since Adamson himself was the teacher of the mainstream course, there was a great deal of interaction between the course teacher and the ESL teachers/researchers, who attended the linguistics course along with their students/subjects. These latter facts may be important forjudging the precourse.

The precourse attempted to teach four academic skills: note-taking, preparing for tests, writing papers and oral participation. Note-taking was taught from an ESL teacher's notes that were discussed and modified in the ESL class. Preparing for tests was taught by giving the students a practice test; the students' responses were critiqued in class. Because of its importance in the linguistics course, a great deal of time was spent on helping the students write their papers. It seems, however, that at least as much time was spent helping them with the techniques needed to gather the data on which the paper

would be based as with the actual writing of the paper itself. Finally, the ESL class provided a reduced-risk environment in which the students could learn to take part in oral interactions in the classroom.

In general, at the end of the three-week precourse, the ESL students showed weaknesses in their ability both to handle the subject matter and to deal with tests effectively. At times, their coping strategies failed them miserably; although, somewhat surprisingly, they did notably better on essay questions than on multiple-choice exams. They showed less weakness in their term papers, which, in general, compared favorably with those of the regular students, eventhough it has to be noted that the ESL students had more time to do theirs and, obviously, got more help. The ESL students found the precourse difficult, but "were enthusiastic about [it] because they thought that it prepared them for academic courses" in the US (p. 102). Adamson concludes that

> The precourse appears to be an effective way to teach academic strategies in an ESL program. It fills a gap in Brinton, Snow and Wesche's (1989) typology ... because it is appropriate for students who would not be able to pass a regular university course, even on an adjunct basis. ... Although in general the ESL students performed below the level of the regular students, in many ways they participated effectively in the [content] course (p. 103).

With Chapter 5, "Academic Competence," Adamson attempts "to draw together the strands of theory and case studies research into an account of academic competence." (p. xii) Like Saville-Troike before him, he does not attempt to give a definition that begins "Academic competence is ... ." Rather, he takes as a given that one is academically competent when one is able to (successfully?) complete academic tasks.

After admitting that it will be oversimplified and unsatisfying, he gives (p. 106) the usual boxes-and-arrows diagram of "How ESL Students Accomplish Academic Tasks." The box at the bottom has three parts (from left to right): PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE (basic level, image schematic, Cooperative Principle), LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, and BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE (scripts for school, subject specific). The arrows indicate that these three lead to BASIC UNDERSTANDING, which leads to STUDY STRATEGIES, and on to ENHANCED UNDERSTANDING, then PRODUCTION STRATEGIES, all of which culminates at COMPLETED ACADEMIC TASKS. Coping strategies are, according to the arrows, a path that circumvents all steps between the box and the culmination.

Anyone who proposes planning a course to develop academic competence should pay close attention to pages 105 through 114 because, there, Adamson picks up many strands brought out earlier and adds, for example, critiques of Bloom's taxonomy and of some of the attempts to teach the so-called higher order cognitive skills. This chapter ends with a strong, clear statement and explanation of "Principles for Helping ESL Students Develop Academic Competence," to wit:

1. Academic strategies should be explicitly taught on an individual-
    ized basis.
2.   Students can best learn strategies in a language through content
      course that uses authentic text.
      a.   The content material should be studied in depth.
      b.   The course should provide contact with native speakers.
3.   Teaching should be interactive in ways that are compatible with
      students' learning styles and prior scripts for school.
4.   Teaching should be experiential.
5.   The content subject should be one that students will need to know
      when they are mainstreamed (p. 114).

In Chapter 6, "Models of Language through Content Programs," Adamson moves on to eminently practical matters by describing and evaluating, with detailed examples and one more case study, theme-based courses, precourses, adjunct courses and sheltered courses. He observes that a precourse is easier to set up, plan and carry out, and involves less immersion than an adjunct course, that it can, perhaps, give the student "real" academic credit (which relates to his fifth principle), and "that ESL students seem to be more motivated ... than when they are doing the 'dry-runs' that form the syllabus" of study-skills or theme-based courses (p. 125).

Adamson speaks highly of adjunct courses and compares two examples in detail; however, his conclusion carries a note of caution:

> In sum, the adjunct course provides the most authentic setting in which
> ESL students can learn effective academic strategies. But care must be
> taken to enroll only students with the requisite combination of language
> proficiency and background knowledge to keep up with the course. Other-
> wise, the students will be overwhelmed, and the ESL section may have to
> be devoted entirely to enhancing understanding of the content material to
> the neglect of strategies instruction (pp. 126-127).

Finally, Adamson describes and discusses one particular sheltered course in detail and reports the case study of "George: A Ninth-Grade Student in [an unrelated] Sheltered Course." This case study is the most satisfying of all because of the extensive detail and transcriptions given; one, in a sense, gets to know George. However, Adamson's conclusion repeats the cautionary note of before; the sheltered course did not by any stretch of the imagination prepare George for mainstreaming and he even seems to doubt that George would have been successful in a subsequent adjunct course on the same subject matter. "In short, the ESL program at George's high school needs to make full use of the resources available in the mainstream to build a bridge for ESL students" (p. 134).

Chapter 7, the last, is an extensive list of "activities that [teachers] can use to help students understand content material and develop academic strategies" (p. 135). If one only had time to read a small part of this book, this chapter is the one. I think it would be helpful to both experienced and inexperienced teachers, and especially to those in-between; that is, experienced teachers who have never given a language through content course. The activities described are graded "into three types: those that help students understand the literal meaning of content material, those that teach academic strategies, and those that invite students to have fun with the concepts being taught" (p. 135). The list takes three forms: a one-week series of lesson plans from Adamson's precourse, a list of other activities that might have been added to that particular course or used in a similar one, and "sixty-one short suggestions for more activities, most of which are best suited to theme-based or lower-level courses" (p. 135).

The central message of this book is that becoming academically competent is a very complex process and that teaching academic competence is a task typified more by relative failure than by success. Although I think this book makes an important contribution to the field of language teaching, I am left with two points of dissatisfaction. One has to do with the non-definitions of "academic competence" that both Saville-Troike and Adamson have arrived at. While both guidelines and principles are useful, they skirt the issue of what constitutes (successful) academic competence. The underlying idea seems to be that, if you follow the guidelines or satisfy the principles as best you can, you will have given the best course you could, and the Devil take the hindmost. The lack of specific references to both different kinds of "what" and some sorts of "how much" or "how well" means that it is virtually impossible to suggest criteria for sufficiency or insufficiency, success or failure; and if teachers do not have these kinds of information, it will be very difficult for them to plan and judge courses. This may be why Adamson's precourse was not a total success and why he defends the course-type on the basis of its ease of planning and realization, but not on its comparative results.

The importance of our field's looking for a more satisfying definition of academic competence goes beyond the fairly limited context Adamson addresses. Foreign-language teachers cannot be expected to teach what they cannot do; teacher trainers in different countries cannot plan courses and set standards if no framework within which to do so exists. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that the definition of academic competence in one culture will be more than vaguely similar to the one in another culture. For instance, while Adamson and his colleagues are undoubtedly academically competent in US culture, it would be illogical to believe that they would be equally so in another; conversely, it cannot be presupposed that non-native teachers or teacher trainees who have been academically successful in their own native context will be able to be successful in the educational context of the foreign culture whose language they teach. (And it has to be recalled that both Saville-Troike and Adamson disqualify language proficiency alone as sufficient for academic competence and underline the importance of skills and scripts.) From this point of view, Adamson's call for more research becomes

even more urgent.

My other criticism is that Adamson accepts uncritically everything that mainstream teachers do in their classes. He seems to feel that an ESL teacher should take the reality of mainstream teachers and courses as they come, while I believe that a book of this sort might have gone into the question of what sorts of things mainstream teachers might do to help non-native students. For instance, might these teachers not be encouraged to use part of the blackboard as a backup for the ESL students' note-taking? Might they not give some kind of practice test to all their students? A great many more ideas come to mind as one reads the book. Adamson calls for breaking down the wall between ESL and mainstream courses but he does not indicate who should cross the breach. His book, however, leaves the impression that the onus is on the ESL teacher. Personally, I feel that the crossover should be in both directions. Especially in countries like the US that have significant numbers of non-native students at all levels of instruction, teacher education and training should include these students' needs as a topic in both preservice and in-service courses.

Finally, as I read the book I found myself thinking "Ok, that's what happened to the ESL students, but what was happening to the native-speakers?" I cannot but wonder how many mainstream students, even with their more highly developed scripts and linguistic skills, fared just as badly as the ESL ones. Some parallel case studies of native-English speaking students would have been very informative, I think. Furthermore, comparative case studies would bring out many details of the nature of academic competence in this specific educational context.

I recommend this book very highly. Besides being useful to teachers in a number of different situations, I believe it should be added to both teacher educators' and research-ers' stock.

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