



In search of clarity: Designing and constructing graceful highways of understanding for readers of International Masters of Engineering theses.

Key Words

clarity, academic writing, style, engineering

Abstract

Academic writing is often obfuscating and can confuse students, especially international students for whom English is a foreign language. Many students attempt to imitate this style thinking that in the complexity of the writing lies complexity of thought and concepts. The skills required to write with clarity require an understanding of how language functions as a meaning making system. This presentation contends that writing is a craft and can be taught; apprenticeship into academic writing is possible and the elements of clarity, coherence and grace achievable. This approach was applied to the Masters of Engineering students' thesis writing at Charles Darwin University. The writing ability of International Engineering students enrolled in this program was identified by the faculty as not being at a post-graduate level. This led to the Academic Language and Learning Success Program (ALLSP) targeting the skills required for every stage of the thesis with 16 tailored workshops (each two-hours long). These international students required explicit teaching: workshops were designed using a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) framework with the predominant use of Williams and Bizup's (2017) principles of style and Swales and Feak's (2009, 2012, 2015) pragmatic language focus tasks as resources; many of the texts used to address language and style issues were the students own work. Using the pedagogy of active learning, the students are guided by mini-lectures which are followed by their applying what they have been taught to their own or peer writing. Using students' authentic texts in this way keeps them engaged and on task as they find the texts are relevant. The students are actively engaged with the dominant working mode being pair work and group work - they work individually when needed. Every workshop was designed using the engineering paradigm of problem / solution. The approach was to identify the problem with a 'let's fix it' set of options; this was developed further, extending beyond the grammar into stylistic considerations. Feedback from the engineering school has been overwhelmingly positive as the most recent cohort of engineers submitted their theses on time with these reflecting a great improvement in cohesion and clarity.

References

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