

1. From High School to HE – Bridging the gap

UK Context: All international students that enter Higher Education (HE) in the UK must have a specific level of English. Typically students enter university having taken the IELTS, FCE, CAE or CPE exam. Nevertheless, when studying at UK HE institutions, international students, whether studying at undergraduate or postgraduate level, often struggle during their first year with their academic writing.

Discuss with a partner.

1. Can you think of any reasons why?
2. Is it the same in your country?
3. What English exams do students take/need to have in order to get into university in your country?
4. Do you feel these exams prepare students for what you teach them? And what is expected of them?
5. What do students find most difficult when writing they enter HE in your country?
6. As teachers, how do you support your students with their academic writing?
7. Do you feel you offer your students enough support? If no, why not? If yes, how?

FCE vs HE written tasks

We're going to start by looking at the key differences between the FCE written exam and a typical first year undergraduate HE written assignment.

Look at each task and make a note of the tasks most salient features.

FCE Part 1

You must answer this question. Write your answer in 120 – 150 words in an appropriate style on the opposite page.

- 1 You have received an email from your English-speaking friend, Sara, who is planning to open a restaurant. Read Sara's email and the notes you have made. Then write an email to Sara, using all your notes.

email

From: Sara Martins
Sent: 15th March 2006
Subject: Restaurant

You remember how Alex and I have always wanted to open a restaurant – well, we're going to do it!

We want to serve food from different countries in our restaurant so we're planning to travel around to collect some ideas. We want to come to your country. When is the best time to come?

Say when and why

We want to find out what people cook at home every day. What's the best way for us to do that?

Suggest ...

We'd also like to go to some local restaurants which serve traditional food. Can you recommend one?

Yes, give details

When we open the restaurant in July, we'd like you to come. Will you be free?

No, because ...

Reply soon.

Sara

Part 2

Write an answer to one of the questions 2 – 5 in this part. Write your answer in 120 – 180 words in an appropriate style on the opposite page. Put the question number in the box at the top of the page.

- 2 You have seen this announcement in an international magazine.

MY FAVOURITE TEACHER

Tell us about a favourite teacher of yours and say what you remember about him or her.

We will publish the most interesting articles next month.

Write your article.

- 3 You recently saw this notice in an English-language magazine called *Theatre World*.

Reviews needed!

Have you been to the theatre recently? If so, could you write us a review of the play you saw? Include information on the characters, costumes and story and say whether you would recommend the play to other people.

The best reviews will be published next month.

Write your review.

- 4 Your teacher has asked you to write a story for an international magazine. The story must begin with the following words:

Anna had a very special reason for getting up early the next day, so she set the alarm for 5 am.

Write your story.

(Examples taken from Sample FCE Papers)

First year HE assessment

You have been given 4 texts to use as sources for the following essay question:

Higher education is an effective means of both obtaining employment and learning the basic prerequisites for the global workplace. Discuss.

Please use at least two of the texts provided, together with two additional academic sources.

1000 word essay

(Assessment taken from EAP04 module at the University of Westminster 2012)

Discuss with a partner.

- What are the main differences between these tasks? Are there any similarities?
- What type of vocabulary is needed in each case?
- How do the written tasks differ in terms of structure?

Focus on Vocabulary

As experienced teachers, I'm sure you recognise the importance of developing students' academic vocabulary. There are many ways that this is dealt with in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) coursebooks or websites. The most typical focus on the following areas:

- Differences between formal academic language and everyday language
- Phrases to refer to sources and to paraphrase or quote
- Vocabulary to organise texts
- Word building with Latin affixes
- Words with Greek and Latin roots

Discuss with a partner.

- Can you think of other vocabulary areas that you commonly teach? Or that your students need to know in order to complete assignments?

While the above language areas do go some way to developing the students' general academic skills, the role of discipline-specific specialist language in the students' chosen academic field is often ignored. This is largely because the general EAP material is aimed at students before they enter their specialist field.

Discuss with a partner.

- What problems do you have in teaching academic vocabulary?
- Do you find it difficult to identify which words will be useful for your students?

Academic vocabulary can be described as either '*technical*' or '*abstract*' in nature.

Technical academic vocabulary normally has a field specific meaning. It often needs to be defined and can be put in a taxonomic relationship with other terms in the same field e.g. *secondary school* – needs defining to distinguish it from other meanings of secondary (not as important), and is in a taxonomic relationship with *primary, higher* etc.

Abstract academic vocabulary can be described as referring to terms to do with meaning and thinking such as *idea, concept, theory*; or to non-specific concepts e.g. *problem*,

Parts of British **higher education** are **pedagogically constrained** by the **marketisation** that has **accompanied** its **expansion**

Most academic disciplines will have a mixture of both these kinds of vocabulary. While the technical vocabulary is intrinsic to the students' specific knowledge of their field, they will have to frame the technical vocab using the abstract vocab. **Research has shown that acquisition of abstract academic vocabulary is a strong indicator of how well students learn subject specific content** (Stahl & Nagy 2006; Marzano & Pickering 2005).

Discuss with a partner.

Think about the course of study your students undertake at university.

- Do you think they will have more difficult with technical or abstract vocabulary?
- Do the resources you use focus more on one kind of academic vocabulary?
- How can you, as their teacher, make the students consciously aware of the technical vocabulary used in their discipline?

Here is an extract from one of the texts that was used with the **First year HE assessment**. The text **discusses the value of a university education**.

Read the text and try to:

- circle technical vocabulary (in the field of education)
- underline abstract (but academic vocabulary)

With a partner highlight the words/phrases which you think would be **useful for the students to use in a subsequent lesson**.

The role of universities in turning undergraduates into critical thinkers is being undermined by marketisation, academics have warned. Intellectual development is still a priority of the elite universities, says the paper in the journal Teaching in Higher Education. However, new universities' links to business via vocational courses and industry placements make them more likely to frame pedagogy purely in business terms, it adds. Rather than transforming their students into critical scholars, these institutions are simply producing "a more confident and content mass who remain a willing workforce". "Parts of British higher education are pedagogically constrained by the marketisation that has accompanied its expansion," say Mike Molesworth, Elizabeth Nixon and Richard Scullion, the authors of the report and members of Bournemouth University's Media School.

Although the sector should critically reflect on the market economy beyond campus, the paper suggests that "the emerging role" of some institutions is to "fix in students an unquestioning acceptance of the primacy of consumer desires". The authors criticise the emphasis some universities place on industry placements, which they say confirms the view of a degree as a means to a job. They also point out that institutions offering vocational courses as a route into some industries are reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them. The authors argue that institutions that treat specialist knowledge as a commodity risk undermining themselves in a world in which knowledge is shared more openly. Critiquing facts is more important than acquiring them, the academics say. "If the value of facts is reduced and complex learning is unattractive, what is left to be sold is the passport of the degree certificate," the paper adds. "Marketised education is not even an effective preparation for the workplace because it may not provide the imaginative and critical graduates who are able to deal with technological and societal change, let alone instigate changes themselves." Higher education's commodification is being driven from the top, the authors say, pointing to Bournemouth's "Get a better job, get a masters" campaign as an example. Students themselves are playing ball, arriving at university with the desire for a 2:1 "framed primarily by its subsequent bargaining power in the job market", they add. The paper, says: "Tutors must critically reflect on their role in maintaining education as personal transformation."

Newman, M., Market Value Dominates Sector. Times Higher Education. [online] available from: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=407206> 2nd July 2009.

Discuss with a partner.

- Which of the words that you highlighted are included in the Academic Word List?
- We can check using this website:
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/alzsh3/acvocab/awlhighlighter.htm>

Back to the value of education

- ✓ Before highlighting specific vocabulary try and think about what you want the students to do with it, and when
- ✓ Acquiring vocabulary is a process that requires exposure to the target language, so it is good idea to provide students with the opportunity to see the vocabulary again and again
- ✓ Students may need to be exposed to an item of vocabulary as many as twelve times before it 'sticks'

These are the words from the AWL that feature in the text. It probably wouldn't be very useful to just tell the students 'These are the academic words – now remember them.'

Level 1

[economy](#) [role](#) [sector](#)

Level 2

[acquiring](#) [complex](#) [institutions](#) [journal](#) [maintaining](#) [primarily](#)

Level 3

[constrained](#) [emphasis](#) [links](#) [technological](#)

Level 4

[emerging](#) [job](#) [subsequent](#)

Level 5

[academics](#) [primacy](#)

Level 6

[authors](#) [transforming](#)

Level 7

[confirms](#) [media](#) [priority](#)

Level 8

[accompanied](#) [commodity](#) [via](#)

Level 9

[route](#)

Level 10

[reluctant](#)

These are the **chunks of language** that I identified as being useful to my students for the subsequent debate:

- undermined by marketisation
- a priority of the elite universities
- vocational courses
- pedagogically constrained by the marketisation
- a degree as a means to a job
- vocational courses
- bite the hand that feeds them.
- instigate
- commodification
- playing ball
- bargaining power

And this is part of the follow up activity to focus on these chunks:

In small groups tell each other what you understand by the **highlighted** words and phrases in the text. Can you identify at least two idiomatic expressions in the text?

Now complete the following sentences with one of the **highlighted** words from the text:

- i. Higher degrees are a _____ tool for negotiating salary when a job is offered.
- ii. The Arab Spring revolutions could be used to _____ reforms of education systems in the region.
- iii. Going to university is supposed to be an opportunity of a lifetime as well as a _____ to a better education.

.....

The purpose of this exercise is not only to reinforce the vocabulary by more exposure to it, but also to highlight more collocations e.g. bargaining power / tool, instigate changes/reforms.

Time to reflect

- From what we have looked at, how could you change or help bridge the gap from High School to HE?
- When would be the right time to devote some time to bridging the gap?