

Learning to fish for a lifetime: Personalised mobile academic phrase libraries – project proposal

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This paper is the proposal for the initial phase of a research project that aims to explore student engagement and feedback on a personalised, digital academic phrase library resource – MAPLE (My Academic Phrase Library on Evernote). This resource offers learners a digital, assignment focused, template where they can record generic academic phrases from their discipline specific readings to build a personalised, discipline specific, academic phrase library. This project aims to advance the use of academic phrase libraries from pre-selected examples to individual student / teacher co-constructed resources. This resource situates the learner and the learning within the discipline specific academic reading and writing contexts required to develop academic reading and writing skills. The context is a diverse cohort of first year health students from 14 disciplines enrolled in a compulsory academic skills paper. Some preliminary findings will be presented.

Keywords: m-Learning, academic phrase library, student engagement, Evernote

Background

Academic phrases

“I don’t know how to start my sentence!” is a familiar complaint from students learning to write in an academic style. In writing assignments, students hunch over laptops fishing for appropriate academic sentences. To succeed at university both native and non-native speakers of English require competence in academic discourse in a range of situations (Biber, 2006; Wingate, 2012). Within academic discourse, as with other discourses, there are formulaic expressions that are characteristically used by the participants in that community (Durrant & Mathews-Aydinly, 2011). For example, in research articles there are common academic phrases such as “The aim of this study is to...” or “Further research is needed on ...” These can be called generic academic phrases because they are formal and functional in nature and do not contain concepts. As such they can generally be reused without being considered as plagiarism. These phrases are some of the ‘fish’ students are trying to catch.

Within the field of English as a Second Language teaching, English for Academic Purposes, and English for Specific Purposes, studies have directed learners’ attention to these formulaic phrases. They have used concordance software to analyse discipline specific texts to determine commonly occurring phrases and vocabulary (Supatranont, 2012). Some generic and many discipline specific academic phrases are not likely to be known by students who are either native or non-native speakers of English, therefore guidance is required to help all students acquire relevant academic phrases.

Current resources – giving fish

Academic phrases have been distributed to students in class to develop academic style (Durrant, 2009; Supatranont, 2012) and some are also available as online resources such as the Manchester Phrasebank (Morely, 2014) and a mobile application called The Academic Phrasebank. Such resources provide a number of pre-collected phrases for learners to use. However, giving students pre-collected phrases can be likened to giving a student a fish rather than teaching them how to fish. One of the main problems is these resources offer phrases without their surrounding context. The context in which phrases occur is an important aspect of acquiring understanding and use of them. Situated cognition argues that purposeful learning requires authentic activities within authentic contexts (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Marco, 2011).

Constructivism, situated cognition and task based learning

Constructivism sees knowledge as built through active engagement with their environment rather than passive reception of transmitted information (von Glasersfeld, 1989). The implications for instruction are that it should establish learning contexts and facilitate learners making sense of their experienced world rather than being given a predefined set of responses (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992). Brown et al. (1989) argued that educators needed to consider the context in which knowledge was acquired since knowledge is gained through its situated use. They noted the implications for learning are that instead of teaching isolated examples, students need to work

with the examples within the context they occur in because “Learning methods that are embedded in authentic situations are not merely useful; they are essential” (p. 37). Furthermore, they stated the experiential nature of task based learning is congruent with the concept of situated cognition as it allows learners to understand the culture in which the examples are used, which in turn helps learners to participate in that culture. It is also congruent with constructivism because it emphasises learning based on individual experience within context (Soare, 2013).

Van den Branden (2006) stated that within the field of second language, learning task based learning is one of the educational approaches. Tasks in context aim to achieve real goals for learners through competence in the target language, that is, they gain competence in the language through actually using it. The goal is related to a real need, learners are supported to acquire the language by using it, and they are evaluated by how they perform on an assessment of their language use. Lee and Swales (2006) found strong doctoral student engagement with building their own discipline-specific corpora to develop their writing.

Nunan (2004) emphasised that active participation by the learner is critical. He described an educational procedure as underpinned by seven principles: Scaffolding (supportive framework), Task dependency (one task leads to the next), Recycling (multiple exposures to target language), Active learning (use what they learn), Integration (learners see the connection between language form and function), Reproduction to creation (learners able to create their own) and Reflection (learners reflect on how they learn). The proposed MAPLE resource incorporates these principles. If students are going to learn how to fish, they need to know where to find appropriate phrases, how to extract them from the original texts and how to select the most appropriate examples for their writing style. This requires active participation by students at the site of the texts. Finally, learners need to use their ‘catch’ to form part of their own pieces of writing.

m-Learning and situated cognition

Education has shifted towards more learner-centred pedagogy in which students have greater control over what, where and when they learn (Crompton, 2013). Parallel to this is the development of mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets and laptops that allow learning to occur in places and times outside of formal educational settings. This method of learning delivery is called m-Learning; however, the definition of m-Learning is contested and is now argued to go beyond the use of mobile technology to include other aspects such as: the learner, the environment, collaborative practice, and sense of ownership (Traxler, 2009). Greater flexibility for learners to engage in authentic contexts is made possible with m-Learning. Previous research has called for studies to see past the hype of new technology and to investigate how mobile devices can actually be used in learning (Campigotto, McEwen & Demmans Epp, 2013; Peters, 2007). Therefore, it is important not only to develop resources based on their potential to be delivered through mobile devices but also to see how students actually engage with them in authentic contexts and whether this leads to positive learning experiences and outcomes.

The study context

The Knowledge, Enquiry and Communication (KEC) paper is a core paper that most first year students are required to take in the Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences at Auckland University of Technology prior to entering any of 14 health disciplines. The School of Inter-professional Studies delivers this paper. Considering the need for students to actively engage with discipline-relevant academic expressions, it is worth exploring how students might engage with a learning resource that they can customise to collect phrases from their own discipline and that suit their personal writing style. Individuals develop preferences in writing style (Bobicev et al., 2013) so students may be more likely to remember and use phrases they have selected themselves. In the KEC paper, students’ attention is already brought to the existence of these phrases; however, there is not much time to cover them in depth due to the time required to cover other aspects and skills in the knowledge enquiry process. Furthermore, students do the vast majority of their academic reading and writing outside of formally structured class time. Therefore the use of personal academic phrase library could be an effective way for students to acquire academic phrases. Students can do this within the context of their reading by using the mobile application Evernote. Evernote is a cloud-based online application developed for note taking and storing that allows synchronisation of information across multiple devices. The proposed study aims to investigate this possibility. The research aims of this study are to:

1. Evaluate the use of MAPLE to develop students’ use of academic reading to develop their academic writing.
2. Train students to understand what academic phrases are and to recognise, classify, modify and collect examples of academic phrases in their personal Evernote libraries.

3. Examine whether students use the phrases they have collected in their written assignments.
4. Evaluate the student engagement with the resource (enhancing the learner experience, suggestions for improvement, and attitudes to using their mobile devices for learning).
5. Use the evaluation to develop the MAPLE resource (including the suitability of Evernote as the mobile application).

Method

Participants

Participants will be volunteers from the first year students enrolled the KEC paper in Semester two, 2014. The expected enrollment is approximately 400 students. Focus groups are anticipated to include approximately 20 students whose use of MAPLE varies from infrequent to frequent users. Participation will range from providing questionnaire data only, to also allowing researcher access to the student's MAPLE and written assignments, and to participating in a focus group. All students will have access to MAPLE regardless of whether they are in the study or not.

Resources

MAPLE is a 15 page resource constructed in a Word document. It is organised in alignment with the functions required for the written assessments for the KEC paper, for example, introducing a topic and defining a concept. Within each function are three examples of generic academic phrases and a suggested starter resource or method to find more examples. There is space below each section for students to write any notes they have about their experience with MAPLE (see Figure 1). Evernote was chosen as the mobile application for MAPLE because it is free and allows students to upload and modify documents on their mobile devices. Students are directed to instructions on how to download Evernote and get a copy of MAPLE on the KEC online website. This website also contains six modules that teach students how to: identify, find, organise, modify, collect and use generic academic phrases. Students are instructed to use the examples they find rather than the ones provided.

Introducing a topic

Resources: Look at the introduction sections of sources.

Read sources on literature reviews (purpose & methods) – e.g. Cronin, P. Ryan, F., & Coughlan, M. (2008). Undertaking a literature review: A step-by-step approach. *British Journal of Nursing*, 17(1), 38-43. (found by Googling "literature review the first step")

1. X [sleep] **is an important part of** Y [a healthy routine].
2. **Within the field of** X [addictive behaviours] **researchers have investigated** Y [gambling].
3. **There has been increasing interest in** X [racehorse injury prevention].

My examples

- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Diary space (use this space to reflect on your experience of using this structure)

Figure 1: Sample section from MAPLE

Procedure

Participants will be recruited early in the 13 week semester. They will fill in an initial questionnaire about demographic information and mobile device access. Students will collect and store academic phrases in their libraries on Evernote. Students can grant access to their libraries by the researcher who will store these electronically for analysis. At the end of the semester students will complete a final questionnaire about their experience with MAPLE and suggestions for improvement. Those who have agreed will allow the researcher to access their MAPLE and written assignments. Some participants will be selected to participate in the focus groups. The MAPLE resource and preliminary findings will be presented.

Conclusion

The development of mobile technologies and pedagogies that allow greater situated learning for students offer new possibilities to develop academic writing skills and become participants in academic and professional discourse communities. The use of m-learning involves both technology and different learning environments. Clearly technology can support such resources; however, what is less clear is how students will engage with the resource, what learning contexts and experiences they will encounter and what learning outcomes will be achieved. This paper describes an investigation into the development of an academic phrase acquisition resource and the reality of how students engage with it. It is hoped that it will be a resource and experience that does not just give them 'fish' but teaches them to fish for a lifetime.

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