AN EXPLORATION OF PERCEPTIONS AND APPLICATIONS OF SPOKEN REGISTER: IRAQI STUDENTS AT A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

Hayder Al Hamdany
B.A. (Arts of English), M. Ed. (TESOL)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education,
Faculty of Arts
University of Adelaide, Australia

April 2015
Table of Contents

Abstract ...........................................................................................................................................vii
Acknowledgment .......................................................................................................................... x
Chapter One ..................................................................................................................................... 12
  1.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 12
  1.2 Cohort & Problem .................................................................................................................. 12
  1.3 Literature about problem ....................................................................................................... 17
  1.4 Research Questions ............................................................................................................... 18
  1.5 Organization of the thesis ..................................................................................................... 18
Chapter Two .................................................................................................................................... 20
  2.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 20
  2.2 Discourse as social practice .................................................................................................. 20
    2.2.1 Communities and cultural-linguistic practices ................................................................. 21
  2.3 Core Arabian values ............................................................................................................... 22
    2.3.1 Language Identity and Language Socialisation ................................................................. 22
    2.3.2 Arabic Language and Islamic religion ............................................................................. 23
    2.3.3 Personal Identity ............................................................................................................. 25
  2.4 Iraqi’s unique personal identity .............................................................................................. 25
    2.4.1 Geographical background of Iraq ‘عراق’ ...................................................................... 26
    2.4.2 Iraq’s history at glance ..................................................................................................... 26
    2.4.3 The Modern Population of Iraq ....................................................................................... 30
    2.4.4 Education in Iraq ............................................................................................................ 33
  2.5 Education in Australia ........................................................................................................... 42
    2.5.1 Higher Education in Australia ......................................................................................... 43
Chapter Three ................................................................................................................................... 49
  3.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 49
  3.2 Chronology of English Language Teaching Approaches .................................................... 49
3.2.1 Focus on Form ................................................................. 50
3.2.2 Focus on Function .......................................................... 51
3.2.3 Toward marrying form and function .................................. 53
3.2.4 Marrying form and function systematically ....................... 55

Chapter Four .............................................................................. 62
Theoretical Framework and Methodology .................................. 62
 4.1 Introduction ........................................................................... 62
 4.2 Epistemology ......................................................................... 62
 4.3 Interpretivism as the Fundamental Research Paradigm .............. 63
    4.3.1 Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity ..................................... 64
    4.3.2 Blumer-Mead’s Interpretativism ........................................ 65
 4.4 Respondents .......................................................................... 67
 4.5 Materials .............................................................................. 68
    4.5.1 The Questionnaire .......................................................... 69
    4.5.2 Curriculum ....................................................................... 72
    4.5.3 Interviews with the students and their teachers/lecturers .... 75
 4.6 Ethical considerations ........................................................... 81
 4.7 Trustworthiness ..................................................................... 81
 4.8 Conclusion ............................................................................ 83

Chapter Five ............................................................................... 84
Statistical Data ............................................................................ 84
 5.1 Introduction ........................................................................... 84
 5.2 Describing Demographics .................................................... 85
 5.3 Perceiving Proficiency ......................................................... 94
    5.3.1 Perceiving practice of register ........................................ 96
 5.4 Experiencing EAP and BP ..................................................... 99
 5.5 Divining differences ............................................................. 105
 5.6 Coming to tentative conclusions .......................................... 112

Chapter Six ............................................................................... 113
Student Interview data: a narrative analysis .............................. 113
 6.1 Introduction ........................................................................... 113
 6.2 Delving into respondents’ perceptions: open-ended survey questions .......... 113
 6.3 Bracketing and interpretative reduction ................................. 115
6.4 Cluster analysis .................................................................................................................. 116
6.4.1 Practicing of Register.................................................................................................. 117
6.4.2 Family as Supporter .................................................................................................. 120
6.3.3 Experience of Communication during GEAP, PEP and BP .................................. 123
6.3.4 Timing ......................................................................................................................... 125
6.3.5 Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation .................................................................................... 126
6.3.6 Applied Pedagogy ...................................................................................................... 128
6.3.7 Course Evaluation ...................................................................................................... 134
6.3.8 Preferred Learning Environment .............................................................................. 136
6.3.9 Experiencing Communication at the University’s life ........................................... 140
6.3.10 Selective Coding ..................................................................................................... 141

Chapter Seven ...................................................................................................................... 144
Critical Discourse Analysis of PEP Curriculum Documents ............................................ 144
7.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 144
7.2 Critical Discourse Analysis ............................................................................................ 145
7.3 Analysis of the PEP Curriculum .................................................................................. 145
7.3.1 Description of Content .............................................................................................. 146
7.4 Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 190

Chapter Eight ..................................................................................................................... 193
Critical Discourse Analysis of the English Component of the Bridging Program Curriculum .................................................. 193
8.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 193
8.2 The first document Discipline of English (handbook of policies and procedures) .......... 193
  8.2.1 Lexicalisation in the whole 1st document ‘Discipline of English, handbook of policies and procedures’ ........................................................................................................ 194
  8.2.2 Modality in the whole 1st document ‘Discipline of English, handbook of policies and procedures’ ........................................................................................................ 195
  8.2.3 The whole 1st document ‘Discipline of English, handbook of policies and procedures’ ‘Processes and Socio-historical condition’ ........................................................................ 197
8.3 The 2nd document ‘the Course Profile for English 1104 and 2204 Professional English (ESL) 1 & 2’ ........................................................................................................ 203
  8.3.1 Lexicalisation in the whole 2nd document ‘the Course Profile for English 1104 and 2204 Professional English (ESL) 1 & 2’ .................................................................................. 203
  8.3.2 Modality in the whole 2nd document ‘the Course Profile for English 1104 and 2204 Professional English (ESL) 1 & 2’ .................................................................................. 204
10.1 Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 231
10.2 Students’ perceptions of their own register and in the EAP Programs ................................................. 232
10.3 The students experiences of spoken register within the EAP programs ............................................. 234
10.3 Question 2: Curriculum and Teaching of Spoken Register ................................................................. 235
10.4 Limitations and Recommendations ..................................................................................................... 236
DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University of Adelaide Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via The University’s digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Signature

Date
ABSTRACT

Register is a term used to describe how people use language to express different shades of meaning and thereby achieve a particular purpose or function within a particular social setting. In order to explain the processes involved in learning appropriate register, systemic functional linguists use three terms: field, tenor and mode.

Anecdotal evidence as well as a range of research studies suggests that misunderstandings between lecturers and university students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) occur frequently. This is particularly important in spoken language where the student does not have the time to check their errors and self-correct.

The literature suggests that register is often an issue for Arabic students studying in Western contexts, but most of it focuses on writing not speaking. As an Iraqi student myself, I wanted to see how spoken register affected Iraqi students studying in Australia. As an English teacher, I wanted to know how to teach academic register most appropriately to this cohort. Therefore, my PhD project focuses on a group of Iraqi students who studied a Masters in water management and agriculture at an Australian university. To help them with their English, they first attended English preparatory courses at the English Language Centre (called GEAP and PEP). Then they took some undergraduate disciplinary courses alongside a Bridging English course (BP) in preparation for their year of academic studies at a Masters level. I explore the three programs: The GEAP/PEP and the BP (English component) in terms of the application of register in the Programs and the students’ perceptions and/or experiences of register while undertaking the programs.

In order to explore the students’ perceptions of register, I analysed survey data (predominantly open-ended) from all 52 respondents and from follow up interviews with 15 of them which I thematically analysed using qualitative analysis software (NVivo10). For application, I analysed the publically available curriculum and materials used to teach the course using Critical Discourse Analysis. The reason for using this methodology was that it allowed me to focus on the specific linguistic choices, layout and structure of a text while at
the same time exploring the social and historical reasons for these choices (Janks 1997). I also used a thematic analysis of interview data from the Australian English teachers who taught these students in the various programs.

The student perception data revealed that the respondents strongly preferred the two English Language Centre courses the GEAP and more specifically the PEP because of their increasingly explicit focus on register for academic and non-academic purposes, the intercultural communication made possible by the different nationalities in the class and its practical discipline-appropriate activities. They criticised the BP because it was too long, focussed on Business English and therefore was inappropriate to their academic and disciplinary needs. Also, they did not like the fact that the cohort was only Iraqi students. An additional finding from the interview data was that mature-aged students have a particular need to take control of their own learning and become integrated within the learning and social environment.

The critical discourse analysis data and the interviews with the PEP teachers showed that the PEP curriculum had a progressive development of academic skills, genres and registers through tasks and interactions and this was spelt out explicitly in the PEP Student Handbook (the de facto curriculum for the course). The Handbook also revealed an active learning approach and an awareness of the role culture(s) play in developing academic and other registers. In the BP, on the other hand, there was less explicit information on genres, registers and cultures and the documentation mainly appears relevant to a different discipline (English within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) rather than the students' discipline of agriculture within the Faculty of Sciences.

This study suggests that in order to enhance academic register for EAL students, English courses need to be explicit, active and increasingly disciplinary and the students must be culturally integrated into the disciplines, university environment and local culture. This qualitative and interpretative study provides a rich and detailed description of the process of learning English and acquiring academic register and academic cultures. It is significant as it is the first study to focus on spoken register and the Iraqi cohort emerging from a conflict situation and relative isolation into a western academic environment.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, my very special thanks are due to Allah (swt), Prophet Mohammad (S) and Ahl al-Bayt (as), for granting me the courage and spiritual strength to finish my PhD project. This research project would not be completed without Allah’s Grace and Mercy.

Secondly, I wish to express my appreciation to the Iraqi students, Iraqi teachers and Australian teachers who willingly agreed to participate in this research. Without their support, the completion of the research would not have been possible.

Thirdly, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to my supervisors, Dr Michelle Picard (Principal Supervisor) and Dr Nina Maadad (Co-Supervisor), for their kind supervision and detailed attention to all aspects of my work. In this regard, Dr Michelle Picard patiently helped me through a number of initial difficulties and challenges. She made the most direct contribution to my study throughout her constructive feedback and unwavering support. She taught me to understand the theoretical perspectives of systemic-functional grammar, especially register and genre-based theory. When I doubted my ability to go ahead, Dr Picard was at all times encouraging, yet challenged me to achieve my best. Without her guidance, I might not have completed the research.

Finally, my very special thanks go to my family. To my father, who simply believed and stood by me and for being my pillar of strength, especially in the toughest times. To my mother, who supported me by her kind words and her real Doa’a (prayers). I sincerely express my grateful to my beloved wife and the two beautiful boys for all that they have done, and for all that they are doing.
This page has been left intentionally blank.