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Supporting non-native speaker student writers making the transition from school to an English-medium university

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Abstract: In an increasingly globalised world, English-medium tertiary education has become increasingly prominent and sought after. However, non-native speaker (NNS) school-leavers entering an English-medium university, whether as NNS local students or as international students, not only encounter those challenges faced by all freshmen students, but often also soon realise that there is a gap between the English language skills with which their school education had equipped them and those needed for effective English-medium tertiary study. Their lack of competence in academic writing presents perhaps the greatest challenge. This paper will examine data relating to NNS students' experience as freshmen writers. These data are derived from a longitudinal study aiming to understand the language-related challenges faced by first and second year NNS students in an English-medium higher education institution in Hong Kong. The paper concludes by proposing two collaborative initiatives whereby English language teachers work with content subject teachers with the aim of providing language enhancement support that is relevant to the student's programme of study and integrated into their content studies. With a global increase in the number of NNS students studying in English-medium universities (Murray 2016, *Standards of English in higher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), the challenges and possible ways of addressing these that are discussed in this paper are potentially directly relevant to universities in whichever country they operate.

[†]It is with great sadness that this article is to be published following the untimely passing of my co-author, Professor Stephen Evans. Having been both Stephen's co-researcher and colleague at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University for many years, I can attest not only to his scholarship and breadth of knowledge but also to his great humanity and kindness. It is to him that I dedicate this article.

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1 Introduction

This article reports on a study which examines some of the challenges that first-year, non-native speaker (NNS) undergraduate students in a Hong Kong university face when having to write academic texts in English. The University language centre provides structured support for such students, both within the formal curriculum in the form of credit-bearing English for Academic Purposes subjects as well as outside the curriculum in the form of various guided independent learning initiatives. However, in many cases host department academics are either unaware of the scale of the difficulties their students face or are unsure about what might be done to help them (Zamel 1995), and so students receive limited or no language related support from their content subject teachers.

Following a brief overview of some of the relevant literature, the study and its methodology are outlined, and relevant findings are discussed. Based upon the study findings, this article then highlights two initiatives aimed at helping English-medium universities to more effectively support their NNS student writers through closer collaboration between language and content subject teachers.

1.1 The transition from school to university

For any young person the transition from school to university can be intimidating, entailing as it does a complex shift in identity from that formed over the years at school to that of an undergraduate university student with the associated behaviours and expectations (Christie et al. 2008). Although a young person enters university expecting that they will be embarking on an educational journey that differs from what they had encountered at school and which entails changing various previously held assumptions and practices (Christie et al. 2008), it can clearly be an unsettling and challenging time.

For a NNS high-school leaver entering an English-medium tertiary environment, the need for English language competence can constitute a severe additional challenge as they struggle to cope with the unsettling demands of tertiary education (Evans and Morrison 2011; Zhang and Mi 2010), with the student “struggling to understand and make themselves understood [...] and lacking the confidence and ability to complete assignments of the required quality” (Murray 2016: 34). While such students face challenges with regard to all four

skills, various studies (e. g. Evans and Green 2007; Evans and Morrison 2011; Nesi and Gardner 2012; Wingate et al. 2011; Zamel 1995; Zhang and Mi 2010) have highlighted competence in academic writing, which is clearly crucial for effective tertiary study and as a key academic assessment tool, as presenting the most significant difficulty.

Soon after starting their studies, freshmen students the world over discover that there are significant differences in the types of writing that are expected in secondary and tertiary education contexts (Nesi and Gardner 2012). They realise that the training they received at school has not necessarily effectively prepared them for the process of writing an academic text and that there is a need to bridge the gap between the writing expected at school and that at university. NNS students not only face the challenge, common to all freshmen, of trying to enter the discourse community of undergraduate writers (Leki 2007) and develop the academic literacy skills necessary for their discipline (Lea and Street 1998), but also those challenges more specific to the non-native speaker. These are related, for example, to a more limited lexical range, less effective reading skills and weaker overall language proficiency (Morrison 2014).

In an environment which is often driven by pressures relating to institutional accountability and efficiency (McInnis 2001), studies of the overall first-year experience tend to focus on QA issues, particularly regarding students' satisfaction in relation to their freshman year (e. g., Palmer et al. 2009) rather than specifically on the challenges those NNS students face as a result of their studying in an English medium of instruction educational context. Such studies also typically derive their data from questionnaire surveys (Yorke and Longden 2007), which require students to select from a Likert scale, thus having the advantage of easily presenting aspects of the experience such as degrees of satisfaction or ranking of perceived ability in specific skills. These surveys, while relatively easy to administer to large student populations and therefore tending to be more reliable when claiming generalisability, do not allow for examination of the reasoning behind an individual's response to a fixed question that they may or may not feel is of relevance to them.

Much recent research into the first-year undergraduate experience in Anglophone universities has focused on the challenges that (NNS) international students face in such an environment (Andrade 2006). However, unlike the situation in many post-colonial African and Asian contexts, these research sites have predominantly been in places where the medium of instruction is the language that is also used by the students in their daily life outside the academic context.

1.2 The Hong Kong context

Hong Kong provides an interesting example within the post-colonial Asian context where the well-funded universities, established under colonial rule, remain English-medium while serving a population where around 90 % are Cantonese-speakers, and where around 75 % of the city's secondary schools are Chinese-medium (Poon 2010) with Chinese remaining the primary language of communication even in the senior secondary English classroom (Evans 2013). While adjusting to undergraduate life, most freshmen live at home and so may not face some of the adjustment problems such as homesickness, isolation and culture shock that international students experience during the school-university transition, and which have tended to be the main focus of first-year experience research. Students do however come to university life having completed their secondary schooling in an education system that previous research (Ho 1979; Littlewood and Liu 1996; Poon 2010) indicates has not very effectively prepared them for university learning, teaching and assessment. Compounding this is the students' attitude to English itself. Evans and Morrison's (2011) study indicates that students, perhaps understandably, see little need and have little desire to use English outside the classroom, seeing it rather simply as a language to be used when required in class and as a subject to be passed.

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), where this study was conducted, is the largest higher education institute by student numbers in Hong Kong. It has approximately 30,000 full-time and part-time students, of whom about 80 % are from Hong Kong, 15 % from the Chinese mainland (mainly non-Cantonese speaking) and 2 % from overseas, studying a range of subjects but with an emphasis on Business, Engineering, Construction and Environment, Design, as well as Hotel and Tourism Management. Over 90 % of students are English NNSs, with the great majority speaking Cantonese as their mother tongue. The academic staff of slightly over 1,500 are a mix of NNSs from Hong Kong, NNSs from the Chinese mainland and native-speakers (or near native-speakers) from overseas. Like other Hong Kong tertiary institutions, the University has an academic unit, the English Language Centre, the role of which is to enhance students' English language communication skills for both their academic study and future profession.

2 The study

While institutions world-wide provide various types and degrees of support for students making the school-university transition, the specific challenges faced

by NNS students are often less well recognised and understood. As noted above, previous studies have tended to have been based on data derived from single multiple-choice item questionnaire studies, which allow for easy identification of data such as degrees of satisfaction but often do not examine the reasons behind the students' responses. The study from which the data discussed in this paper were derived sought to more fully understand the language-related challenges that first and second year NNS students face in an English-medium higher education institution in Hong Kong, and as a result to inform qualitative enhancement of the student experience for those in the critical first period of the academic adaptation process. The four main objectives were to:

- i. identify and understand the language-related challenges that students experience when making the transition to English-medium higher education in Hong Kong;
- ii. determine the strategies they employ to overcome the challenges of studying in a second language;
- iii. categorise the range of background factors that may help or hinder students' adjustment to study in an English-medium tertiary learning environment;
- iv. propose a series of practical measures to facilitate students' transition to English-medium teaching and learning in Hong Kong higher education.

The research design of the overall study was in part inspired by Johnson and Turner's (2003: 298) "data collection matrix", which includes a "research approach continuum" from pure qualitative to pure quantitative research, the former referring to "exploratory, inductive, unstructured, open-ended, naturalistic and free-flowing research", the latter to "confirmatory, deductive, structured, closed-ended, controlled and linear research" (p. 297). It comprised two frameworks for the collection and analysis of both longitudinal and cross-sectional data. The longitudinal tracking of a cohort of freshmen students over their first two years of study constituted the main thread of the investigation, and was seen as a valuable means of exploring change and enhancing our understanding of causal influences over time (Bryman 2008: 50). It is therefore well-suited to capturing and illuminating the ways in which freshmen NNS students face up to the many challenges they encounter in their programme of tertiary study. The cross-sectional elements, which included questionnaire surveys, focus groups and structured observations, served to capture "snapshots" of students' perceptions and concerns.

The data relating to undergraduates' experience as student writers to be discussed in this paper, and which were a very small part of those collected

and analysed as part of the overall study, were collected using two collection methods – a short open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The main focus in this paper will be on the interview data, as explained below.

2.1 Data collection methods

The questionnaire, which was conducted mid-way through the first semester of the students' tertiary study, was in the form of a simple slip of paper asking students to respond quickly and briefly to the question, written in English and Chinese – “What is the biggest challenge you have faced in adapting to English-medium studies at university?”. In total, 1,181 freshmen students responded. This constituted approximately 45 % of the first-year cohort. 954 completed it in English, 223 in Chinese and four in a mix of English and Chinese. The student comments were analysed, and then categorized according to the challenges identified. Of the respondents, 84 % ($n=998$) isolated one major challenge, 12 % ($n=141$) identified more than one, while the remaining 4 % ($n=42$) considered that they had encountered no significant difficulty. This simple questionnaire, while not used as the primary data source for this paper, proved to be a rich source of illuminating data which not only helped the researchers to better understand some of the difficulties faced by the students, but also enabled them to better focus the questioning in the interviews conducted shortly after the end of semester one.

For the interviews, which are the primary focus of this paper, “purposeful sampling” that selected “information-rich cases” (Patton 2002: 230) resulted in the inclusion of 40 study participants, an unusually large sample for a longitudinal study. They were broadly representative in terms of their programmes of study and there was a fairly equal representation of those with Chinese-medium and English-medium secondary school backgrounds. Around two-thirds ($n=27$) of the participants were female, which simply reflects their greater willingness to respond to the call for participation. They were fairly homogeneous in terms of their English language competence, with most ($n=31$) having attained level 4 in the Diploma of Secondary Education (the Hong Kong English-language school-leaving examination, one level 3, three level 5 or 5*, with the remaining five having taken another assessment. The HKEAA benchmarks a Diploma of Secondary Education level 4 result to an IELTS overall band score of between 6.31 and 6.51.

The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 40 min and were conducted in Cantonese, the students' mother tongue, so that the participants felt

less pressured and better able to express their ideas effectively. An interview guide that outlined the topics to be covered was used but within this pre-determined structure the interviewer employed open, specifying and probing questions that aimed at stimulating meaningful discussion of the issues. Following the project's Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) efforts were made to avoid guiding the participants' responses as much as possible, the researchers preferring rather that the data emerged (bottom-up) without pre-supposition on the part of the interviewer.

2.2 Data analysis

The interviews and the questionnaires (where necessary) were translated into English, and the English language transcripts and questionnaire responses were then analysed by the same bilingual (Chinese-English) project associate who had conducted the interviews, with the aim of minimising problems such as the translation of culturally-nuanced terms relating, for example, to emotions. The first stage of analysis, which corresponds fairly closely to Dörnyei's (2007) "initial coding", involved an iterative process of reading, highlighting and annotating the scripts with comments, observations and labels. After review and refinement, initial or "open codes" (Strauss and Corbin 1990) were grouped into categories and sub-categories reflecting recurring patterns in the data. The data coding and analysis software NVivo (Version 9) was then employed to aid in the quantification and cross-referencing of the participants' responses in each category and sub-category. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

3 Findings

As might be expected, the 1,181 first-year students who completed the open-ended questionnaire and the forty who participated in the semi-structured interview identified a wide range of challenges they had encountered as freshmen writers in their first semester at an English-medium university. Participants highlighted broad concerns about, for example, their grammatical knowledge and the size of their vocabulary, as well as very specific worries related to aspects such as the length of texts they were expected to write and their ability to find and effectively exploit relevant source texts.

The questionnaire data suggest that, overall, students in their first eight weeks of study regarded vocabulary ($n = 407$), academic adjustment ($n = 205$)

and writing ($n = 181$) as the three biggest challenges they faced in their transition to university study. More specifically, with reference to writing, 65 % ($n = 119$) highlighted issues that related to genre and academic style as the most problematic. Amongst others, individuals also referred to problems relating to writing longer texts than they were familiar with and the extra workload associated with this ($n = 15$), as well as issues related to grammar and sentence patterns ($n = 6$). While vocabulary as an issue was highlighted by only two participants in relation to writing, it was, as noted above, identified as the single greatest challenge they faced overall.

With the questionnaire data providing an informative backdrop, this paper will primarily focus on those challenges identified by interview participants ($n = 40$) that relate to the process of academic writing, rather than on specific writing skills needed. The primary themes that emerged related to the differences perceived between university and secondary school study, reading academic texts, and, in terms of the writing process, searching for relevant sources, grappling with academic text structure, and paraphrasing and summarizing. Table 1 outlines the themes and associated specific issues to which participants most commonly referred.

Understandably, since they had only fairly recently left school, most participants expressed concerns regarding the process of academic writing within the frame of differences they perceived between their secondary and tertiary learning environments as well as the very different expectations of their university lecturers when compared to those of their secondary school teachers. Other major themes that emerged were related to their reading skills, searching for sources, and academic writing itself – specifically in terms of text structure, and paraphrasing and summarizing.

3.1 Difference to secondary school teacher expectations

As can be seen from Table 1, approximately 75 % of the interview participants identified the difference between what secondary and tertiary teachers expect of their students as an issue of concern. They seemed generally aware that writing would “play a more and more significant role at university” (Andy, Accounting & Finance) and that the type of writing that was required was different from that they had produced at secondary school. A number however reflected the uncertainty forcefully expressed by Tracy (Social Work) who felt “bewildered with the requirements to write formally ... what we regarded (at school) as a formal essay may no longer be formal”. The uncertainty expressed by participants arose in various contexts and seems to have been primarily derived from a shift from the

Table 1: Major themes and associated issues identified by interview participants.

Themes [n = number of interview participants referring to this]	Specific issues
Difference from secondary school teacher expectations [33]	<i>Type of writing required</i> <i>Reproducing knowledge v logical/critical thinking</i> <i>Uncertainty and fear:</i> <i>Word length</i> <i>Lack of guidelines, samples and feedback</i>
Reading [19]	<i>Academic style</i> <i>Identifying main points</i> <i>Sentence structure</i> <i>Vocabulary</i>
Information search [8]	<i>Over-searching</i> <i>Finding relevant and primary sources</i>
Text structure [7]	<i>Unfamiliar structure</i> <i>Developing and organizing ideas</i> <i>Paragraphing</i>
Paraphrasing/summarizing [13]	<i>Understanding the text</i> <i>Lack of vocabulary:</i> <i>Range</i> <i>Academic lexis</i> <i>Difficulty rephrasing</i> <i>Fear of plagiarism</i>

spoon-feeding, highly structured secondary environment where there is always a “correct” answer to one where greater learner autonomy and logical and critical thinking is expected:

- (1) This is not like secondary school, where the emphasis is on the skill of answering questions and the ability to reproduce knowledge. The demand for logical thinking is nothing compared with that at university. (Bill, Language, Culture and Communication)

As noted above and as Morrison (2014) highlights, the teacher’s role and expectations were a major theme for participants, both in terms of the uncertainty as well as unfamiliarity of these freshmen students with regard to some of the requirements. Identified by the questionnaire respondents as the third most serious challenge and noted by nine of the interviewees, the word length

required for some of their writing assessments reflected the concern expressed by Jenny regarding the content required:

- (2) 2,500 words really means a lot to me. I remember I just needed to write no more than 800 words [...] at secondary school. I haven't ever written such a long essay before [...] I am not sure what the exact requirements are, whether I am required simply to answer the question given or think and answer more deeply. (Jenny, Language, Culture & Communication)

The issue of “uncertainty” arose repeatedly, and uncertainty regarding requirements and teacher expectations seems to have been compounded by the difference in the amount and type of guidance given to students. Reflecting Andrade's (2006) observation that students felt “greater learning support would be advantageous” (p.138), our participants complained of a lack of detailed guidelines, samples and feedback for assignments. Vivian (Nursing) noted how this also impacted on her ability to write her assignments and to meet the word-length requirement:

- (3) [...] no specific instructions were given. That is basically very different from the arrangement we had for assignments at secondary school. At secondary school our teachers gave us detailed guidelines, telling us which points to cover to fulfill the purpose of the assignment. These guidelines served as the steps on which to build up the assignment and to meet the word requirement.

In other words, unlike at school, she was no longer provided with an essay outline into which she could simply insert the information she had memorized; the structuring of the essay was now her responsibility. If the lack of such guidelines and of sample texts was felt to hinder their essay drafting, the lack of feedback and guidance was seen by some participants as an impediment to their learning too: “the grades I got so far don't meet my expectations. I want to ask why the grades are so low [...] I don't know what I should improve” (Debbie, Medical Laboratory Science).

3.2 Reading

Of the challenges identified in both the mid-semester one questionnaire (n = 119) and in the interviews with regard to reading, by far the most commonly highlighted one was that of academic style. Interview comments expressing a view

that texts were “too academic” (or similar) accounted for nearly one-third of all those highlighting reading, followed by those relating to sentence structure ($n = 7$) and lexis ($n = 2$). Apart from comments relating to the unfamiliarity and conceptual difficulty of content, the issue of a perceived academic style was most often expressed in relation to reading texts that have a “complicated sentence structure” (Naomi, Management) with “words (that) are complicated” (Winnie, Textiles and Clothing). Bill (Building and Real Estate) related this to his secondary school experience:

- (4) [Texts are] actually quite difficult to read because the words and sentence structures are very different from those encountered at secondary school, and they are very difficult to make sense of.

As noted above, Winnie recognized the challenge relating to lexical complexity. She also however referred to the issue of text length, noted above in relation to writing, describing the content as being “long with extensive elaboration” and concluding with a seeming note of desperation that she was “bored by them”. This would seem perhaps once more to relate to her previous secondary school reading experience where texts would have tended to be of limited length.

Lexis and sentence structure impacted participants in different ways, but a common result was that they tended to find difficulty in identifying the focus of a paper or the main ideas an author was trying to make, leading Ian (Accounting and Finance) to admit he was “at a loss about what the passage is talking about”. Elizabeth (Hotel and Tourism Management), whose tertiary reading experience had been “awful”, linked this to consequent difficulties in notetaking:

- (5) I was not able to identify the main ideas in a paper [...] I was not able to get the focus [...] so I ended up highlighting the whole paper every time.

Once more, some participants tended to link this back to their school learning experience, with Naomi (Management) bemoaning the fact that she could not “check [her] understanding using exercises and examples [such as her school teacher would have provided] [...] so there is basically no way I can check if my understanding is correct or not”.

3.3 Information search

The challenge of searching for relevant sources concerned a number of participants, being perhaps best summarized by Social Work student, Tracy:

- (6) The problem was that, despite there being a lot of information [...], I could only find a little of that which was useful to me [...] it was a big problem to filter out articles that were useful.

A number of participants referred to the search process as being time-consuming and troublesome, with one complaining that it consumed about 60 % of the total time he had spent on the assignment as a whole. The same participant, Paul from Accounting and Finance, however, explained that, unlike Tracy, for him it was not so much the process of identifying suitable sources, but rather the process of integrating these into his writing that was problematic. He questioned whether he should find sources to order to develop his main points or rather develop his points and then find supporting sources. His concern and the seeming lack of preparation and planning that students made for their information searches reflect one of perhaps the major, but less discussed, issues facing freshmen students, which is not explicitly identified by participants but which has been noted in previous studies (e. g., Leki and Carson 1994; Evans and Morrison 2011; Morrison 2014). Relating back to their very structured secondary school experience, that is a lack of effective planning – both in terms of their writing and overall time management.

3.4 Text structure

As with many of the challenges the interview participants reported facing, those that relate to the structuring of an academic text ($n=7$) seem primarily to have their roots in a lack of familiarity and understanding of the expectations of the target genre: “ if I had been familiar with the structure of these essays, the writing process would have been much smoother” (Gary, Building and Real Estate). Apart from paragraphing, a skill in which these students should have had at least a basic grounding at secondary school, the concern most commonly expressed related to the development and organisation of ideas. The experience of Erin (Chemical Technology) when writing an essay for a China-related general education subject, the concepts for which she was fairly familiar with, serves to demonstrate that the problem lies not so much with the content but rather the expectations of the tertiary discourse community, particularly in terms of the need for effective inter-textuality:

- (7) I thought I could do it quite easily [...] but then when I wrote, I found it was difficult for me to organise what I had collected and group the information together with the ideas I had in my mind.

3.5 Paraphrasing and summarizing

As noted previously, reading academic texts was acknowledged by many participants, and perhaps not sufficiently by academics, as a challenge that underlies many others. This is particularly the case with regard to the skills of summarizing and paraphrasing: “[...] the most difficult part (of paraphrasing) is understanding” (Angel, Property Management), and “[...] it’s difficult because you have to understand the original ideas first” (Lawrence, Management). This difficulty clearly leads to considerable problems when a student attempts reframing a source text in their own words.

Together with comprehension difficulties, a lack of vocabulary was the other most commonly cited source of concern to participants when attempting to summarize and paraphrase ($n=3$). As has been highlighted elsewhere as an issue of general concern to undergraduate writers (e.g. Morrison 2014), our participants repeatedly identified a lack of vocabulary, both in terms of range and knowledge of academic lexis, as a significant shortcoming when paraphrasing and summarizing and one which led to a fear of their committing plagiarism: “I dare not change the vocabulary that much for fear that I wrongly paraphrase the meaning [and thus] [...] I am always afraid of plagiarising” (Gary, Building and Real Estate).

4 Addressing the challenges

To address the main issues raised by participants in this study – understanding the differing expectations of secondary and tertiary teachers, reading academic texts, and being able to meet the expectations of written academic discourse – language centres typically provide different types of language enhancement opportunities for students. However, a lack of an understanding among some content subject teachers of the nature of the challenges that NNS students face, particularly with regard to the teachers’ own “lack of explicit knowledge about writing” (Wingate et al. 2011: 77) and of the tendency of universities to see language support as being the remit solely of the language centre can lead to a disconnect between students’ content learning and the development of the language competence they need in order to learn such content effectively. The challenges that our participants highlighted relate not only to linguistic issues, an aspect with which content subject teachers are more likely to identify (Andrade 2006), but also to genre and university study skills in which their content subject teachers are stakeholders. These issues would probably be more

effectively addressed if the language centres were to work in greater concert with faculty across the university, thus more effectively embedding academic literacy support into the curriculum (Hyland 2000; Wingate et al. 2011). Thus, in addition to the support that they most often provide – language courses, self-access centres, online learning materials and workshops – language centres can lead the way in collaborative initiatives where language teachers work with content subject faculty to help ensure that students are provided with language enhancement support that is relevant to, and integrated into, their content studies.

Examples of two initiatives at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) that are designed to help address some of the problems faced by NNS freshmen are the *Enhancing Students' English Ability Community of Practice* (CoP) (Lave and Wenger 1991) and a writing-across-the curriculum (WAC) (Russell 1987) project which provides collaborative support for students in the assessment writing process, both based on close liaison between language and content subject teachers. The CoP has the potential to support students in relation to all three of the areas of concern identified by the participants in this study, while WAC initiatives have particular potential in helping students with challenges they face with regard to academic reading and writing. The initial success of these initiatives at PolyU with regard to the positive impact seen on both learning and teaching suggests that they are models that, with further refinement, may help address some of the concerns highlighted in this article.

4.1 Teaching community of practice

A teaching CoP is a tool designed not for direct teacher-student interaction but rather for teacher-teacher collaboration, where teachers working in a similar or shared environment come together in order to work towards a common understanding of how to provide the best learning experience for their students (Shi and Yang 2014). In the tertiary language enhancement context, it provides an empowering framework within which language and content subject teachers can pursue necessary, ongoing and meaningful dialogue, where they can share experiences and professional development opportunities. This engagement should then lead to deep learning and changes in behaviour which more effectively support students (Wesely 2013). Perhaps most valuably, in bringing together English language and content subject teachers it can enable exploration of ways in which content subject teachers can help their students apply the academic English knowledge and skills they have been taught to their

content learning, throughout their university studies. The potential benefits to be derived from such a CoP in terms of student learning are that the content teacher may be better able to advise with regard to genre-specific language and that these teachers are embedded in the students' study, not just for the few weeks that is generally the case for the language teacher, but potentially over the whole course of their studies.

The PolyU *Enhancing Students' English Ability* CoP has three main objectives. These are: to create a community of academic colleagues from various disciplines in order to share insights into ways to enhance English language learning and teaching; to provide a forum for discussing ways content subject teachers may become more effectively involved in enhancing their students' English; and to support the application by students of the insights derived from their language enhancement provision to their content subjects. By providing opportunities for closer collaboration and a better mutual understanding between content and language teachers, a primary goal is for universities to be able to better address the challenges facing students that revolve around a mismatch of expectations regarding both acceptable academic discourse and tertiary teacher expectations more broadly. At the same time, the opportunity for language teachers to provide content subject teachers with a better understanding of their students' level of reading competence is potentially extremely valuable in terms of helping to ensure that the reading demands placed on freshmen are not unrealistic.

4.2 Writing across the curriculum

Collaborative support for students attempting to understand and conform to the academic discourse expectations of their discipline can take a number of forms. The innovative, interventionist approach employed at PolyU aims to facilitate content subject teachers in supporting students writing disciplinary genre-specific texts. It has four main objectives: to communicate the value of a WAC approach to English language and content subject faculty; to establish initial collaboration between the two groups; to provide tailored writing support for students; and to evaluate the impact of a WAC approach on learning and teaching (Lughmani et al. 2016).

In this model, a colleague from the English Language Centre works closely with a content teacher in the development of a content subject assessment which involves the students writing an extensive text. In their discussion with content subject teachers, language centre colleagues provide suggestions as to how the content teacher can prepare his students for, and support them in, the

writing of their assessment. This collaboration may well involve consideration of the type of writing that is expected, the type of instructions and rubrics needed in order to effectively guide students in their writing, as well as possible ways in which the content teacher can connect what they expect with the students' content and genre knowledge. This close collaboration also helps the language teacher ensure that the content teacher's expectations in terms of both the type of writing and the assessment requirements are as clear as possible to students, and that the content teacher does not have unrealistic expectations of the students' reading abilities – both in terms of depth of understanding and speed of reading.

Apart from involvement in the design of the assessment, the language centre is also responsible for supporting content subject faculty in the form of intervention at four main stages in the assignment writing process. Initially, the language teacher reads a student's first draft and highlights some areas in which improvement can be made, providing a number of actions to be taken for their improvement. Once the student has received this online feedback, they are encouraged on a voluntary, one-to-one basis to discuss with the language teacher how their drafts can be improved. Towards the end of the course, the language teacher reads a second, longer draft, assesses to what extent it is an improvement on the first draft and provides a second set of action points for further improvement. Finally, at this point, they assign a grade (which constitutes 10 % of the total grade) which is awarded for the extent to which the writer has improved the text. Separately, the content subject teacher then grades the text as usual, with no marks being given specifically for language accuracy, but rather judging for comprehensiveness and quality of content, and overall comprehensibility.

4.3 The impact of the initiatives

While neither of these initiatives can on their own be said to provide a comprehensive package of support for NNS students making the difficult transition from school to an English-medium tertiary learning environment, they do begin to address some of the challenges identified in this study in a rather more systemically proactive manner than simply providing generic language courses and access to non-genre specific academic English language learning materials. Importantly, initial evaluation studies have suggested that both students and content subject teachers understand and value the impact of both initiatives.

5 Conclusion

This paper has discussed some of the challenges that first-year NNS undergraduate students studying at an English-medium university in Hong Kong reported facing when writing academic texts. These challenges, which were identified primarily by means of in-depth interviews, generally relate to their secondary school experience, their reading competence, and the expectations of the academic discourse community. An important source of uncertainty and concern relates to the differences participants perceived between the expectations of their university lecturers and those of their secondary school teachers, and the realisation that university learning was very different to the “spoon-feeding” approach with which they were familiar. Unfamiliarity with an academic style of writing, together with their lack of vocabulary and lack of familiarity with more complex sentence structure, meant that they tended to struggle when reading academic texts, which in turn made various aspects of academic writing difficult – in particular discourse structuring, and paraphrasing and summarising.

More than one thousand students responded to the first semester questionnaire and attempts were made to ensure that the forty interview participants were fairly representative in terms of their programmes of study and included a roughly equal number of those from Chinese medium and English medium secondary education. While a teacher’s pedagogical instinct might suggest that these challenges are quite often encountered by students across the globe, it should be cautioned that the study’s setting and subjects are not necessarily representative of students at other universities in Hong Kong, let alone overseas. Thus, any attempt to generalise these findings to other tertiary institutions must be made with great caution and with reference to other relevant studies. Furthermore, the interview data are based on self-reports of learning experiences, language proficiency, and adjustment to academic study, and are therefore potentially affected by misleading dynamics such as the halo and Hawthorne effects.

While this study has identified a number of challenges facing NNS students making the transition from school to an English-medium university in Hong Kong and in so doing has confirmed much anecdotal evidence provided by Hong Kong university English teachers, there is a need for further, larger-scale studies to examine the extent to which it might reflect the experience of tertiary students in other parts of the world. It is also necessary to rigorously evaluate the effect of the two interventions outlined above. Finally, at present the burden of ensuring that freshmen writers effectively and efficiently

acquire the necessary academic writing skills rests primarily on English language centre teachers; it must be determined to what extent it should become the responsibility of all those involved in the various stages of a university student's programme of study.

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Bionotes

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