

The Fiji Form 7 Prescription and the Language Needs of First Year Tertiary Students

Veena Khan and France Mugler

This article is based on a study of how well students in Fiji are prepared by the Form 7 English Prescription to cope with the English language skills required in their first year at the University of the South Pacific (USP). It includes an analysis of the four major language skills in the Prescription and in the English for Academic Purposes course at USP. The views of several high school teachers and USP lecturers from different departments were also sought. Both the Form 7 and the USP students surveyed, although acknowledging certain difficulties, rate their ability in writing, reading, speaking and listening quite high. Teachers and lecturers are less positive, citing many problems they see in their students' work. Although the Form 7 prescription does introduce students to the language skills that will help them in their first year at university, there seems to be a need to expand sections most relevant at the tertiary level. There are opportunities for teachers to create innovative strategies using material within the prescription to offer their students more challenging tasks.

Introduction

Many students entering university are not fully aware of what is expected of them and find the transition from high school difficult, resulting in frustration and at times culminating in academic failure. This is true of students at the University of the South Pacific (USP) (Landbeck & Mugler, 1996). Clearly, there is a substantial difference in the modes of teaching and learning at high school and at university. An additional difficulty is that the medium of instruction, English, is not the native language of our students, except in a handful of cases.

One of the problems is the level of proficiency required for their

various studies in the macro-skills of the medium of instruction — English. Students also often fail to conform to the academic conventions of each discipline, particularly in writing tasks. This is a matter of great concern for teaching staff, particularly when much writing also calls for analytical and interpretive skills. Writing presupposes research and informed reading, and a student who has a limited repertoire of reading strategies will find these tasks even more difficult.

University courses increasingly require students to make oral presentations, and everyone is expected to contribute to discussions in tutorials. This can be daunting to new students who may not have had to perform this type of task before and lack the confidence to speak in front of an audience. Moreover, cultures have different sets of rules governing ‘talk’ and students may find the prospect of oral presentations and discussions both psychologically and linguistically challenging. Since the on-campus students’ first access to course content is via lectures, a high percentage of their face-to-face sessions is spent listening to their lecturers. Listening must go beyond understanding a speaker literally; it must be an active and critical process. In the words of Ronald & Roskelly (1985 cited in Hyslop & Tone, 1988) listening calls for “the same skills of predictions, hypothesising, checking, revising and generalising that reading and writing demand”.

Methodology

Data was gathered from four groups: Form 7 students and their teachers, and first year USP students and their lecturers. The instruments used were questionnaires and interviews.

A questionnaire was administered to 248 Form 7 students from seven secondary schools on Viti Levu, Fiji. Three of the schools are run by government, the others by religious or cultural committees. The questionnaire included questions on the perceptions of each

student's own level of proficiency in the four macro-skills, the types of language activities conducted in the classroom and specific areas of difficulties in both spoken and written English.

A questionnaire was administered to a sample (132) of first year USP on-campus students who had completed Form 7 in Fiji. The USP students were asked to rate their ability in each of the four skills when they were in Form 7 (F7) and now that they are at USP on a scale from 1 to 6. The focus of this questionnaire was the students' perceptions of their own level of proficiency in the language learning activities and skills required at university and the difficulties they faced in the four macro-skills as they made the transition from high school.

A questionnaire was administered to twelve USP lecturers who teach first year students in twelve different departments; five lecturers from departments in the School of Social and Economic Development, four from the School of Pure and Applied Sciences, and three from the School of Humanities. The lecturers were asked to specify the main types of written and oral tasks and the amount and type of reading required in their courses. They also were asked to outline the major problems in English expression noted in their students' oral and written work, to comment on the listening tasks required and on the difficulties they thought students had in this area.

A questionnaire and taped interview were administered to seven Form 7 teachers. All but one were Fiji Islanders, and their teaching experience ranged from five to fifteen years, and from Forms 1 to 7. The focus was on the teachers' perceptions of the level of the students' proficiency in English and the difficulties they thought the students experienced in acquiring the four macro-skills.

The data from these questionnaires and interviews was supplemented by an analysis of the language component of the Form 7 English prescription and of the USP English for Academic Purposes course.

Results

Table 1 shows the Form 7 and USP students' self-evaluation in the 4 macro-skills. The USP students' evaluation of their ability in the four skills in their first year at USP is quite high. Their ranking of their ability in these skills is, from best: reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Writing is perceived as the most difficult skill, by quite a large margin.

Table 1: Form 7 and USP students' self-evaluation

(A) above average, (B) average, (C) below average

	Writing %			Reading %			Speaking %			Listening %		
	F7	USP		F7	USP		F7	USP		F7	USP	
		F7	USP		F7	USP		F7	USP		F7	USP
A	68	71	80	85	86	95	80	79	91	79	83	87
B	29	23	18	14	11	4	18	18	8	15	14	11
C	3	6	6	2	3	1	1	4	1	6	2	2

While the ratings of the other three skills are within four percentage points of each other in the 'above average' category, there is a seven percentage point gap between listening and writing.

From Form 7 to university, the ranking has remained the same. The rating at university has improved for all skills, i.e. the students believe that they have made progress all around since Form 7. The perceived gain is quite significant: twelve percentage points

more in the 'above average' category for speaking, a gain of nine percentage points each for reading and writing, the least improvement being four percentage points in listening.

Comparing the ratings of the Form 7 students with the USP students' ratings for when they were in Form 7, there is only 1% — 3% difference. The biggest difference is in listening, where USP students rate their ability 4% higher than Form 7 students.

Evaluation of each macro-skill by students, Form 7 teachers and USP lecturers

Writing skills

The Form 7 students have a generally positive view of their ability in writing. Approximately three quarters claim to enjoy writing expository essays and about 60% say they like working on research projects. USP students are equally positive about their writing skills, with 80% rating these as above average.

Both groups of students seem to have difficulties in similar areas:

	Form 7	USP
Structuring work	47%	50%
Constructing an argument	41%	43%
Writing in the appropriate style	51%	39%
Referencing	19%	34%
Compiling a bibliography	30%	21%
Accuracy of presentation	71%	43%

In addition 41% of Form 7 students have difficulty in expressing an opinion, 39% have problems in getting access to material, 49% cannot write the required length. (Perhaps not having enough ideas is a result of a lack of access to materials.) Summarizing passages is a problem for 38%. For USP students the most difficult tasks

seem to be writing up a research project, expository writing, and writing a review.

Paragraphing is of mid-level difficulty and most students do not think summarising is difficult. They indicate that Form 7 has helped them the most in writing expository essays, research reports, paragraphs and, to a lesser extent, summaries.

It seems, therefore, that, although many tasks that students are asked to do at USP are similar to those they did in Form 7, they still have trouble with them now that they are at university.

Students cited the following factors as contributing to the writing problems listed above:

Lack of practice	66%
Lack of content knowledge	48%
Non English language background	33%
No effort to improve	29%
Adapting to tertiary studies	26%
Poor study skills	17%

It is interesting that students mention lack of practice, even though they indicated that some of the things they are asked to do at USP, they had done before in Form 7. There must be a difference in the way they have to perform these tasks.

The strategies used by USP students to improve their writing skills are: attending workshops (32%), asking lecturers for help (17%), asking friends for help (16%) and reading books (14%). About 21% admit doing nothing to improve their writing skills.

According to these USP students, the most useful ways lecturers can help them improve their work is by checking draft assignments (62%), giving more feedback on errors (24%) and running workshops (24%).

The Form 7 teachers think that their students' main problems are in expository writing, and that their writing tends to be more descriptive than expository. Besides a lack of logic and independent thinking, expression lacks fluency and contains grammatical errors; plagiarism is common in projects. Teachers cite lack of exposure or background knowledge and regurgitation as the causes of these problems and claim that these were not corrected in the lower forms. Original opinions are not asked for in the students' culture, and conditions at home are also seen as playing a role.

Teachers think that these problems can be tackled by encouraging more practice in different forms of writing and learning the value of writing. Independent thinking and taking the initiative to read more need to be encouraged, especially in the junior forms.

At USP, lecturers are looking for clear, concise, well-structured, well-documented, plagiarism-free writing. The stress is also on scientific accuracy, coherence and correct grammatical expression. The work must demonstrate an understanding of the task at hand, which may require interpretation and analysis of data based on a piece of research conducted by the student.

Reporting on problems: over 80% of the lecturers mention inaccuracies in grammar; unsatisfactory referencing, research and cohesion are cited by 67%; and structuring writing, clarity of expression and constructing an argument by 50%. Writing in the appropriate style is not as much a problem as ambiguity and inadequate vocabulary.

Close to half the lecturers indicate that they advise their students to seek help from the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT). One of the functions of CELT is to help students develop their learning skills and proficiency in English. One of the

lecturers said that she asks a CELT member of staff to work with her students in one of her lecture sessions.

Close to 30% ask for drafts of students' assignments, and go over them with the students. One said, "This I strongly recommend for their benefit". Nightingale's (1986:9) comment bears this out:

There is often a feeling that it is "cheating" to get someone to read and comment upon work-in-progress. But few "real writers" would expect to publish something which had not been refereed and revised. Perhaps we are too accustomed to think of student writing as part of the assessment process rather than as part of the learning process. At any rate, students seem to learn much more from comments that are made while they are working than they do from comments when it is too late to help them do better on that assignment.

Thirty per cent also recommend discussion sessions on the type of writing required for a particular genre and distributing additional handouts or leaving them in the library as required reading.

Reading Skills

Students rate their reading ability highly, with 85% of the Form 7 and 86% of the USP students classifying themselves in the 'above average' category. Both groups of students claim that their reading skills have improved over the previous year.

The amount of reading Form 7 and USP students say they do, besides what is required for assignments, is shown below.

	A lot	Some	None
Form 7	27%	70%	3%
USP	25%	66%	9%

Approximately 80% of the Form 7 students claim that reading is one of their hobbies.

Form 7 students report that the most difficult task in reading is finding the main idea in a long text, followed by differentiating between fact and opinion. Interpreting graphs and tables is the least difficult. The USP students identify the same tasks as the most and the least difficult and, for 35%, recognising author bias also is a problem. Strategies used by USP students to improve their reading skills are attending workshops (25%) and reading more on their own (close to 75%). Only a small percentage admit doing nothing.

The Form 7 teachers maintain that most of their students are of average or below average ability in reading. Only a small number have excellent skills, while some are non-readers. Most are able to read aloud but full comprehension escapes many, especially when they are confronted with sarcasm, humour or irony. The reading strategies taught in class concentrate on comprehension and summarising, as these are what is required in external examinations.

There is little evidence of reading outside the classroom. A related factor could be poorly stocked school libraries. There needs to be more exposure to different forms of information media, including audio and video, and encouraging reading at least of newspapers where resources are few.

Depending on their programme, USP students are required to read textbooks, course books, journals, literary essays, reports, newspaper articles and reference books.

Essential skills are comprehension and the ability to identify key issues, theoretical frameworks and biases. Students also need to

understand the structure of a piece of writing and to evaluate what they read critically.

High on the list of the lecturers' perceptions of students' reading problems are their lack of comprehension of abstract ideas, and dealing with long texts. Over half the lecturers feel that students also have difficulty distinguishing between fact and opinion and recognising author bias. Inability to distinguish between major and minor ideas is considered to be not as much of a problem (25%) as interpreting non-verbal texts (41%). An interesting comment was that most students are slow readers, not skilled in rapid reading.

Besides asking students to get help from CELT (14%), some lecturers have discussions in class, or have students go over their difficulties in tutorials, although at least 40% of the lecturers admit that they cannot do much due to time constraints.

Speaking skills

Eighty per cent of the Form 7 students rate their speaking as above average and think that their skills have improved in Form 7. Similarly USP students rate themselves very highly, with 91% 'above average', and again there is a perception of very significant improvement since Form 7.

Nearly all Form 7 students claim to have an opportunity to speak either formally or informally in class, with only 5% claiming that they "never" do. The percentages for USP students are similar regarding speaking in informal settings, with only 8% saying they "never" had a chance to speak. However a larger percentage, 73%, report having the chance to speak formally. This is slightly more than those in Form 7 (67%). This could be because the USP students (85%) report that one of the speaking tasks, the seminar, is always assessed, unlike tutorial or group discussions and the occasional debate. Group discussions are mentioned by 95% of

Form 7 students as providing opportunities for speaking. All other tasks — morning talks, debates, seminars, oratories and drama — are ranked low.

According to the Form 7 teachers, opportunities for formal speaking include oral presentations, debates and project discussions, and for informal speaking, answering questions and group discussions. Quite a few students do well in this skill as it continues the practice in Forms 5 and 6, but some occasionally suffer from shyness. Problems revolve around fear of failure in the task, fear of the teacher and lack of confidence. Culturally, it is a virtue to maintain silence and this is a hard habit to break.

Close to 70% of the USP lecturers interviewed indicated that students are required to do tutorial, seminar and group presentations in their courses. For oral presentations, students need to be able to speak clearly, fluently and confidently. These presentations need to be well-researched, without plagiarism and with “ideas systematized”. Presenters should feel comfortable in public speaking, be able to use multi-media aids, involve the audience, use gestures, and use language correctly to communicate clearly and effectively.

A common problem is that students want to read their presentations rather than talk to their audience, and they rely heavily on their notes — indicating a lack of confidence and of preparation. One lecturer comments that the lack of confidence may be due to the “inability to communicate orally using English as the medium”.

Presentations lack research data to support points made, at times indicating failure to define and understand the topic. Another weakness is the lack of unity in the presentation, a problem compounded by the lack of use of visual aids to help capture audience interest. Fear of addressing a large group is also cited,

resulting in students speaking so softly that they are barely audible.

Listening skills

Form 7 students' rating of their ability in listening is high, but it is slightly lower than their rating in speaking. USP students' rating is not as high as in reading or speaking, but it is higher than in writing. Both groups of students perceive improvement since the previous year, but of all four skills the USP students perceive the least amount of progress in listening. They also claim that they have not been taught listening skills in class, and only a little over half report having these skills assessed. About half of the Form 7 students report listening to audio-taped exercises and to exercises from teachers. Currently percentages may be even lower since the listening component was taken out of the Form 7 prescription in 1998.

Over half the Form 7 students cite unclear pronunciation as the greatest difficulty they have in listening to English, closely followed by fast pace, and long, complex sentences. Nearly 40% also mention difficult vocabulary.

Among the causes of listening difficulties mentioned by USP students, by far the most common (61%) is the speaker's accent. Nearly half also mention complexity of language, and 45% complexity of ideas. Length of talk is identified as a problem by nearly 33%.

Twenty-five per cent of the USP students claim they have attended workshops, another 25% to have read books on improving listening skills, but over 45% admit doing nothing.

Since listening skills have not been tested in the Form 7 exam since 1998, teachers do not focus much on this. Apart from teacher talk,

opportunities for practice include debates and talks about projects, and practising telephone conversations, in the context of the study of registers. One teacher has articles from newspapers taped for use in listening exercises. What causes difficulty for the students are speed, volume, the monotony of some speakers' delivery, and difficulties in concentration. Accent is not a problem, since most teachers are local Fijians or Indo-Fijians and students are familiar with their fellow Fiji Islanders' accents.

At USP, listening is an important skill, as students have to attend lectures, listen to seminars, tutorials, group presentations and guest lecturers. Also, they are given the opportunity to view videos and go to court or parliamentary sessions.

Complex language, lack of experience in listening to English and a lack of understanding of basic concepts are some of the problems mentioned by lecturers. They also cite some of their "own faults" as being the reasons for students' problems: "speaking too fast", "not endeavouring to vary one's lecture style" and "poor presentation".

One respondent feels that the "rote learning and non participatorial secondary school background" are important factors impeding students' listening skills at this level.

Fiji Seventh Form Certificate Examination English Prescription

It is pertinent at this stage to examine the Fiji Form 7 Examination English Prescription and USP's English for Academic Purposes course and to compare the level of the four macro skills taught.

The Fiji Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, in its Preamble to the 1991 Fiji Seventh Form Certificate Examination English Prescription (FSFCEEP), states:

The Form 7 English course is designed for students who will undertake further studies in a tertiary institution as well as for those that will complete their formal education at the end of the Form 7 year.

The course focuses attention on extending the students' skills in communication.

It further lists the course content: writing, reading comprehension, summary writing, varieties of language, literature, listening comprehension and research.

For this study, all the components except literature were examined, in order to identify the sections intended to prepare Form 7 students for university.

In the **writing** section, teaching points focus on the presentation of an argument supported by evidence and on drawing valid conclusions from the points presented in the piece of writing. Cohesion within and between paragraphs, appropriateness, clarity of expression and correct grammatical structure are also stressed. Apart from expository essays, the section also enables students to write longer narratives, speeches, editorials, letters to the editor, formal business letters and pieces of imaginative prose.

Although this section teaches students to write in the register appropriate to the topics, there is a section in the prescription devoted to Register Studies. At least four registers are studied each year, with one changing each year. Examples are:

The language of advertising	The language of science
The language of newspaper	The language of reporting
The language of administration	The language of politicians
The language of sports commentary	(FSFCEEP, 1991)

Questions range from those on tone to specific features of the register examined.

Reading Comprehension allows students to read a number of passages on a variety of topics and written in different styles. The prescription expresses the hope that teachers when choosing extracts would have a three-fold purpose:

- psychological — educating the emotions
- social — deepening awareness of social issues
- literary — encouraging reading and giving practice in comprehension and the different forms of written expression (FSFCEEP 1991).

Teachers are encouraged to choose passages on similar themes written in different styles and to hold discussions in class on the issues raised in the passage. Students are also encouraged to write creative pieces based on the passage. The exam questions on this section focus on:

- author's purpose
- tone of passage
- vocabulary exercises
- linking between paragraphs
- specific comprehension questions on the material given.

Summary writing is done in conjunction with writing preparatory notes from passages chosen by the teachers. It is intended to discourage students from offering "a string of quotations" (FSFCEEP 1991) and avoid plagiarism. Students are given the opportunity to read and work from a variety of passages written in different styles and to write drafts. Furthermore, the section helps students improve their reading skills as it forces them to look for the main ideas and supporting details in a passage.

Listening Comprehension involves note-taking skills and identifying main points. Students are encouraged to listen to the

taped speeches of a variety of people so that they are exposed to different accents. Listening comprehension also encourages concentration on the information given rather than giving opinions on what is said.

Research topics are given for students to choose from and they must use certain discourse types, which include:

- descriptive (appearance and process) narrative
- illustrative (general and specific) cause and effect
- contrastive
- comparative
- definition and extended definition
- classification

(FSFCEEP, 1991)

It is assumed that practice with the above categories of discourse is given in class. So this section also is linked with the reading and writing sections of the prescription. This project is quite demanding, as reports are expected to be 1,500 words long and students are to discuss their findings in special tutorials. They must formulate a thesis and write a bibliography.

Overall the prescription gives students practice in skills useful for their study at USP. However, the degree to which these skills are developed at this stage of their learning and the extent to which they cater for their needs at USP need to be closely examined.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at USP

Jordan (1997) states that “EAP is concerned with those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems”. An EAP course includes study skills and general features which can be summarised as “[a] general academic Register, incorporating a formal academic style with proficiency in the language use” (Jordan, 1997:5). Since 1993,

the Department of Literature and Language of the USP has been offering students an EAP course, LL114. This course was introduced because a number of lecturers thought that there was a need to give first year undergraduate students formal assistance in study skills so that they could cope with the level of English required for studying at a tertiary institution. This need is supported by a number of studies on the competence in English of USP students (Moag & Allen, 1978; O'Sullivan, 1978; Deverell, 1989).

EAP courses, which are offered world-wide, vary according to the needs, circumstances, purposes and institutions for which they are offered. At USP, it is a one-semester course open to any student eligible to take a 100-level (first year) course. It is compulsory for those who enter the Bachelor of Education Primary or Secondary Programmes, the LLB programme, for Management and Technology majors, and highly recommended for those in the Journalism, Population Studies, Geography, and Food & Textiles programmes. It is a general EAP course, i.e. not tied to any specific subject area, because resources and scheduling problems prevent the offering of subject-specific EAP courses. Currently the course is offered through all three modes – on campus, extension and summer school.

The course emphasises the following skills:

Academic writing skills: EAP students are required to write essays, reports and papers, all in an academic style reflecting logical thinking. The focus is on encouraging students to produce writing that is well researched, formally and concisely expressed, analytical and well-structured. The approach used in teaching writing is centered not so much on the product as on the process, which is more learner-centred.

Typically, this process writing approach includes:

1. an analysis of the writing task,
2. brainstorming — to generate ideas/making notes,
3. preliminary writing — producing a rough draft incorporating the ideas with an initial plan,
4. reading/researching,
5. refining the plan,
6. first draft,
7. evaluation,
8. second draft (proof-reading, editing),
9. checking for presentation errors,
10. finished product.

Summary writing and note-taking are included in this area of study. These are important and useful skills, as students are required to select material from academic texts for their research. These skills also help students organise their thoughts and points raised in classes, and their summaries may be the starting point for assignments. They are also useful in preparing for tests and exams.

Reading academic material: This skill is needed for writing assignments and presentations. It requires students to read materials critically, evaluate what they are reading, select material relevant to their assignments and synthesise the points from their readings, including their own point of view.

EAP students are required to read texts for different purposes and become well-versed in different reading strategies: skimming, scanning, intensive reading. They also learn to recognise bias in a text, detect the writer's motive, distinguish between fact and fiction and interpret long, abstract texts. Like writing, reading is a process. Not everyone will reach a full understanding of a difficult text after a single reading. For some, this will only happen gradually, after several readings.

Speaking in Academic Settings: This is intended to develop good speaking skills so that students can confidently participate in tutorials, ask questions in class, and make oral presentations.

Listening skills: Good listening skills are important as students need to be active listeners in lectures, tutorials, seminars and discussions. For non-native speakers of English who are attending a tertiary institution for the first time, problems often arise that are barriers to effective listening: different accents, unfamiliarity with the discipline-specific vocabulary, speed of delivery, length of the lecture, style of the lecturer, and verbal and nonverbal cues. Distinguishing between major points and supporting details can also be difficult. Some lecturers give an outline of what is to be covered in the lecture, others leave it to the students to find out as the lecture progresses.

In the EAP course, students are given practice in listening and note-taking in the lab session once a week. They participate in discussions arising from the issues that they hear about. Incorporated in the sessions is the teaching of summarising skills. Having taken down the main points from either an audio taped or live talk, students will often be expected to put them together in summary form. They sometimes also have the opportunity to view videotapes and work from them. Peer evaluation of their work is encouraged as this also provides them with the opportunity to listen to others, to accept criticism of their work or to “argue the point” if they disagree. An important aspect of the language lab session is that the students are not confronted with material that has not been discussed before by the lecturer.

Reference and research skills: The library is an important part of a student’s academic life, so the EAP course includes introductory tours of the library and information sessions organised by library staff. The students are taught how to do research and use the conventions of referencing for their academic writing assignments.

A majority of first year students are unfamiliar with these conventions and have a lot of difficulty in citing, acknowledging references correctly and writing bibliographies. Through this ignorance, many unwittingly commit plagiarism in their work.

Bridging the Gap

While the Form 7 prescription does offer students opportunities for development in the four macro-skills, the various sections may need to be extended if students are to be prepared to cope at the tertiary level.

Writing

Writing is the area in which students, both in Form 7 and at USP, give themselves the lowest ranking. Students at both levels do similar writing tasks; paragraph writing, essays, reports and summaries. It is encouraging to see that different genres of writing are included in the prescription. At USP, there is significant variation in the number of assignments required (from none to 20), the type of assignment (essays, paragraphs, book reviews, journalistic articles, note-taking, summaries and reports) and weight (typically 40% - 60% of the overall grade). In the first year lecturers ask for 1000-2000 word essays which are free of plagiarism, well-researched, structured logically, expressed coherently, with documented references and a bibliography. This type of writing needs to be given more attention at the Senior high school level.

By their own admission, USP students encounter problems in writing. Form 7 students say they "enjoy" expository writing, yet their teachers claim that this is a problem area; their writing is often superficial and "mere regurgitation". This is not really surprising since there is a lack of exposure to ideas if students are reading very little or nothing at all.

At the tertiary level researched writing is called for. If students at the high school level are not in the habit of reading and researching, their initial writing at the tertiary level will suffer. In their report projects, Form 7 students are taught the basics of referencing and possibly writing bibliographies, and they are warned against plagiarism, but much of their other writing does not reflect the use of these conventions. Thus the problems are carried over into the tertiary level, where lecturers do not have the time to remedy these shortcomings in their students' work.

Students who take the EAP course are in a better position, as the course concentrates on these features and students are required to do several large pieces of researched writing in addition to an oral presentation, the content of which also needs to show evidence of research.

Obviously the process writing steps, outlined earlier, take time in the classroom if they are to be done effectively and, as lecturers have commented, there is no time for all of them as they need to cover content in their subject areas. However, if at Form 7 more time were spent in the classroom practising process writing rather than setting writing tasks to be done as homework, fewer of our students would have problems in structuring and organising their essays. Because process writing calls for a lot of checking and revision of drafts and can be an onerous task for a teacher with close to forty students, peer evaluation of written work should be encouraged. It can help generate ideas, encourage fluency and "provide an audience" (Legge, 1980 cited in Hermann, 1989) that can offer comments on those parts of the writing that need to be improved. Nightingale (1986:9) rightly states that:

Even students who do not write very well themselves are able to make insightful comments on others' work: they even notice errors they are unable to catch in their own work. There are benefits for the student reader as well as

for the writer, for the reader develops editing skills which may be applied to her own work as well.

The Form 7 prescription allows for writing different genres, and this demands different skills. Getting authentic texts of these types and studying the structures and styles peculiar to each will give the students confidence to write in these genres

A good incentive to writing is seeing one's work in print or displayed to a wider audience. Here the school magazine can play an important role, as can the class newspaper. On a smaller scale, just displaying the work on the class bulletin board will boost the writer's interest and confidence. What is important is to give students the opportunity to write, to think for themselves, to develop an opinion on issues, so that when they come to tertiary studies they will not have difficulty in adapting.

It is worrying that a high percentage of USP students do nothing to improve their writing skills (21%). Many lecturers, too, admit to doing nothing to help because of the nature of their course. However, several options are available; one is that more course tutors could incorporate some English language remedial help in their tutorials. They could also encourage their students to take the EAP course on-campus or, as others have done, ask CELT to run sessions in their disciplines and make it compulsory for students to attend so that expression and fluency not only in writing but in other macro-skills can be improved.

Reading

The reader, when confronted with a text, must construct meaning out of it, in addition to interpreting, analysing and evaluating the concepts presented. How well readers are able to do all this depends on the individual experience and background knowledge that they bring to the text. If the concepts are foreign, the ideas abstract, the

language of the text complex, the difficulties will be numerous. This is true for both native and non-native speakers of the language of the text.

Extensive reading and knowing how to deal with full-length texts are important for university students. Although this is not required in the language component of the high school prescription, the literature component provides scope for this.

The Form 7 and USP students have very positive feelings about their reading abilities, but they do acknowledge having some difficulties, and their teachers and lecturers agree. A common problematic area is “finding the main idea/ideas in a long text”. The understanding of a text requires not only understanding the concepts but also the use of cohesive devices and discourse markers, and where there is a lack of such markers the student has to work out the meaning through inferences made by the writer. Thus the reader needs to have a good knowledge of the signaling system used.

In Form 7, teachers typically deal more often with a small number of texts, giving a lot of explanation and setting comprehension questions relating to vocabulary and “who, what, when, where”. There are few questions about the author’s attitude, biases and the contradictions in the texts. This is done, however, in the register study and should be reinforced in the reading and comprehension sections. At the tertiary level more is required. Students need to be able to have an understanding of the structure of a text, to identify the “theoretical frameworks and the biases”, in addition to critically evaluating an author’s modes of presentation and views on issues.

According to some Form 7 teachers, “reading aloud” is not a problem for most students, but full comprehension of all that is read escapes many, “especially when confronted with sarcasm, humour or irony”.

One teacher in particular says that “the reading strategies that are taught concentrate on reading comprehension and summarising, as this is what is required in external exams”, which explains why they do not focus on other important skills. Hence, students encounter problems in their first year of tertiary studies.

USP lecturers also say that the majority of their students “are slow readers, not skilled in the art of rapid reading”. However, there is no time to remedy this problem in the lectures, as the pressure to get through the course content overrides all other concerns. Sending them to CELT, as some lecturers do, will only help if the students attend on a regular basis, but many admit that they do not attend the sessions regularly.

Nuttal (1982:34) thinks that speed reading is useful but is not the “main criterion by which we judge effective reading”. However, we should not stop trying to improve students’ reading speed, especially if in the future they are faced with reading masses of material. Form 7 teachers can give practice in speed reading, at the same time making sure that comprehension takes place by setting multiple-choice questions.

Reading has to be encouraged at high school, with more exposure to different reading materials, to try to solve this lack of interest in reading among many students. Reading widely on a variety of topics will help students formulate ideas, know more about the world, and develop. It also promotes the development of good writing skills. Some schools subscribe to several magazines which are kept in the library but, according to teachers, students hardly read these magazines. Some teachers ask for articles on current issues in order to force students to read and some, they say, do read newspapers. Other materials which are read are school magazines, light fiction and romance (of the Mills and Boon type) but there seems to be little interest in reading. It is “not culturally valued”,

according to several teachers, but students can be encouraged to develop an interest in reading.

The school library is without doubt the most useful resource centre for students, but it needs to be well stocked with attractive books so that students are encouraged to use it. The financial constraints of the school budget are often reflected in the poor condition of the school library – if there is one at all. Many of the books on some library shelves are completely out-dated, and students have no incentive to read them. Teachers in some schools, however, use their initiative and bring in articles or magazines relevant to the interests of the students in a bid to boost reading interest.

In the classroom it is important to provide an environment conducive to reading. Young people are interested in music, and the use of song lyrics can awaken interest in the most reluctant reader. Short stories, short plays, and peer discussions centred on them can also encourage reading. The interests of young, adolescent students are many and varied, and teachers can use these to get them to write and read in groups and stimulate discussions. Unless our students are encouraged to read and see the value of reading before going to tertiary institutions and unless they are trained in the higher levels of reading, they will continue to have problems in their studies.

Speaking

Improving the English language speaking skills of our students means improving their ability to express themselves effectively in the register required. These skills require a great deal of practice, more so when the students are not native speakers of English and only have the opportunity to use the language at school. When they do use English orally they have to remember that, just as in

their own language, the vocabulary, grammar etc. change according to the situation. They also have to learn the conventions of turn-taking, negotiating and using strategies to ensure that listeners are able to understand the importance of what is said. So the role of the class teacher is to provide a positive environment to encourage students to practise their oral English.

However the opportunities for speaking in the classroom arise mainly during student question time and group discussions supervised by the teacher. There are not many opportunities for student seminars or debates at high school. Although the Form 7 prescription requires a project to be written, it is not clear whether all students give oral progress reports on their project. This is one of the many areas in the Form 7 prescription which can be successfully used by the teacher to facilitate oral communication and encourage peer evaluation. A large percentage of the “talk” that goes on in the classroom is that of the teacher, who spends most of this “talk time” either giving instructions, explaining exercises to be done or dictating the contents of the subject area. So the students are mostly passive listeners, and thus become passive learners. As Stabb (1986 cited in Zhang & Alex 1995:2) states, we teachers become “so involved with establishing routine, finishing the textbook, covering curriculum; and preparing students for standardised tests that we have forgotten one of our original goals, that of stimulating thought”.

At USP most courses require students to participate in tutorials and present seminars, which are assessed and may constitute 10-15% of their overall coursework mark. This is the gap between the Form 7 and USP students. While group discussions are part of both sets of students’ oral tasks, the more formal oral presentation is not part of the Form 7 course prescription. Group discussions imply a more informal exchange of ideas amongst students, in a situation where, amongst their peers, they can feel free to express their views. This confidence when speaking within a group setting

is borne out by the fact that 42% of the Form 7 students describe themselves as “very confident” when speaking in informal settings, as opposed to 13% in formal settings.

Breaking down the barriers of silence can be quite difficult as culturally it is not appropriate for young people to express an opinion, and silence is considered a virtue. So if at home expressing one’s viewpoint is not encouraged, then at school it may be considered disrespectful by some cultural groups to argue or express a view in public. Shyness is also something that quite a few students have to overcome at Form 7 so that it is not carried over to their first year at university. To overcome shyness, learning needs to become more student-centered to allow more time for student talk in the classroom.

To help their students better cope at the tertiary level, all Form 7 teachers – and not only teachers of English - need to establish a non-threatening environment where the students are involved in tasks that encourage them to express their views without fear of the teacher. Teachers no doubt will have ideas as to how to get their students to speak in front of an audience. From role playing, to commenting on current events, to giving a five minutes presentation on a topic that interests them, the students will not only learn the correct register required in oral communication but also become much more confident in their ability to stand up and talk in front of a new group of fellow students.

Listening

Listening in any classroom implies ‘active listening’, which means going beyond literal comprehension and “recognising digressions and separating the relevant from the irrelevant” and “as speakers use both verbal and non-verbal cues to put forward their views ... to use those cues to understand what is being said” (Khan 1996:7) while at the same time analysing what is being said.

It is alarming to note that the development of listening skills is not particularly focussed on by teachers or lecturers, especially when a researcher like Wilt (1950 cited in Hyslop & Tone, 1988), who is still widely cited in current studies, found that “people listen 45% of the time they spend communicating”. It would be natural to assume, then, that teachers help their students develop listening strategies and become active listeners, yet the teaching of this skill is largely neglected. Even though listening comprehension is not currently tested at the Form 7 level, there should still be provision for it to be included in the prescription.

First year students at USP spend up to fifty minutes at a time listening to “lecturer-talk” and taking down notes, and they have three to four such sessions a week in each of their four courses. Yet they are not taught listening skills at USP unless they take our EAP course, nor are they exposed at high school to listening strategies which may help them become active listeners. Many opportunities are available to the students to listen, but “how to listen and for what” is not really addressed.

According to Hyslop & Tone (1988:1), Swanson’s study (1986) suggests that “teachers are not apt to get much training on teaching listening”. They further state that “his survey of 15 textbooks used in teacher education programmes reveals that out of a total of 3,704 pages of text, only 82 pages mentioned listening”. So it looks as if teachers, not knowing how to go about teaching listening skills, tend to ignore them in the classroom.

Another problem carried over by USP students from Form 7 is the habit of writing down everything that they hear. Not having been taught good listening strategies whereby teachers emphasize the need to focus on the main ideas, they find it difficult to identify main points and major details. Students often struggle to make sense of lectures, especially when it is in a discipline new to them (e.g.

Psychology). At the same time they have to contend with the lecturers' style of delivery and their own limitations in English.

Although in Fiji it may not be financially viable to have language laboratories in schools, it is possible to have tape recorders or even a self-access space in the school library to give students practice in listening skills and to familiarise them with the purpose of different kinds of talk and the ways in which speakers convey meaning as well as their attitude towards the topic. This would add variety to the lessons. Initially short excerpts should be played and tasks set on them, so that students can focus on specific information. The recordings should feature a variety of accents since, after leaving Form 7, students will have to listen to other speakers of English.

An aspect of the Form 7 prescription which can be successfully incorporated into strengthening listening skills is the study of registers. Recordings of advertisements, excerpts of political speeches, religious sermons and so on could be obtained without infringing copyright rules. A whole array of material can be used to make the sessions interesting, such as films, radio plays, narrations, oral literature and 'live performances' from guest speakers, and story-telling sessions.

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Seven-year-olds can also make deeper meaning of the information that surrounds them. They may be able to talk in metaphor, reflecting an ability to think more broadly. My daughter once innocently asked, "When will the rain stop dancing?" We avoid using tertiary references. You can learn more about how we ensure our content is accurate and current by reading our editorial policy . Having passed 1 year of tertiary study at a recognised institution or 85% pass from the Upper Secondary School Leaving Certificate. Kenya. Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) with grades C to D-. Having passed 1 year of tertiary study at a recognised institution. Khazakstan. Completed secondary education (grades of 3 and above). Having passed 1 year of tertiary study at a recognised institution. Malaysia. SPM with grades 1-6 or Chinese unified exam; or equivalent. 3 passes in STPM with C or better, or a maximum score of 18 points over 6 academic subjects in the UEC. I authorise the INZ and the Department of Labour to provide Unitec with any personal details regarding my immigration.