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Developing Students' Linguistic and Analytical Skills: The Use of Anchored Instruction in an Introductory Sociolinguistics Course

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Introductory sociolinguistics courses at university can be challenging, especially for students at the very beginning of their tertiary studies. Difficulties may arise due to students not having any prior exposure to the discipline's content or methodologies, which is likely to be a result of these aspects not generally being taught in high schools. Undertaking introductory sociolinguistics courses may prove even more problematic for students in alternative pathway programs, as they often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or have had unsuccessful prior learning experiences. As a result, such students tend to struggle with adequately developing fundamental skills in sociolinguistic, which include objectively analyzing their own use of language and that of others. To assist students in acquiring these and other relevant generic competencies, we developed a teaching tool based on anchored instruction, which comprises a series of filmed scenarios. Preliminary results and feedback from students indicate that the tailor-made instructional videos assisted them in drawing links between their real-life use of language and theoretical sociolinguistic concepts.

The ability to actively participate in the learning process is critical for students to achieve higher levels of academic performance (Byrne et al., 2002). However, most first-year university students have limited or no expertise in how to learn in higher education contexts (Briggs et al., 2012). This lack of knowledge and experience often prevents students from engaging in the learning process in a more meaningful way and, as a result, from reaching their academic potential. This is particularly true for non-traditional students who have experienced significant educational, social, personal, health, and/or financial disadvantage during their upper secondary years (McNaught & Benson, 2015; Pancer et al., 2004) and have thus relied upon an alternative pathway to higher education. For novice learners to become cultural insiders within the university, it is, therefore, crucial to help them effectively engage with the relevant theory and academic practices in the early years of their studies (Sebastian & Zimitat, 2007). One of the feasible ways of doing that at the pathway and undergraduate levels is to use anchored learning activities (Berardi-Wiltshire & Petrucci, 2015), which embed discipline-specific content as well as cross-disciplinary competencies, such as critical thinking, reasoned analysis, and problem-solving (Jones et al., 2016).

In this paper, we will present a teaching tool informed by anchored instruction that has been incorporated into an introductory sociolinguistics course to help students with analysis of human interaction and self-reflection of language use in real-time. First, we will give a brief overview of the course, including the problems that students undertaking it were facing. Following that, we will discuss anchored instruction, a framework that was applied to address these issues. Then, we will describe the tool and comment on its efficacy by reflecting on student feedback. Finally, we will outline the ways the described teaching innovation may be effectively used across a range of humanities and social science disciplines.

The Introduction to Sociolinguistics Course

The introduction to sociolinguistics course (henceforth referred to as "the course") is part of an open-access alternative pathway program offered at a regional university in Australia. One of the key features of the program is that it allows almost anyone – regardless of their socioeconomic or education background – to study for a qualification that may be used to gain entry to a range of undergraduate programs across Australia. Such widening participation initiatives, on the one hand, promote equity and diversity (Bennett et al., 2012); but on the other hand, they bring pedagogical challenges at the institutional and individual levels, requiring teaching methods which are flexible enough to provide the best learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their prior experience in education.

Most pathway students taking the course have limited or no prior experience in either the higher education learning environment or in sociolinguistics. For them to successfully engage with the teaching and learning culture and transition from the pathway to the undergraduate level, there is a need for learning environments that can help them, on the one hand, gain expertise in the discipline and, on the other hand, develop a set of academic skills (O'Rourke et al., 2019). Apart from having little or no prior knowledge of basic (socio)linguistic concepts, most of the students taking the course have never envisaged linguistics as an academic discipline or viewed it as a discipline relevant to their future career path. For these students, (socio)linguistic content needs to be delivered in an accessible and interesting way, best done by building upon previous learning and real-world experience

(Barkley, 2010). Compared to those who have just left high school, the students enrolled in the course and the program are also generally more mature in terms of age and life experience. They, therefore, tend to favor seeing the applications of (socio)linguistics outside purely academic contexts, as this allows them to draw connections between their life experience and the course content (Barkley, 2010; Doyle, 2008; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Another challenge stems from the fact that the students studying (socio)linguistics at this level move on to a range of degrees from the humanities to the sciences at the undergraduate level. This implies that teaching staff need to provide students with the opportunity to acquire and develop the knowledge and skills that they can later apply across a range of undergraduate degrees.

Within the pathway program, the course is delivered in both fully online and (increasingly) blended modes. Like in other introductory courses in sociolinguistics, students explore the way language changes across time, physical, and social settings. In addition to covering such basic sociolinguistic concepts, the course aims to help students view language objectively and scientifically and thus broaden their critical and analytical thinking in general. Through a series of scaffolded learning activities anchored around discipline-specific skills, the course, moreover, endeavors to enable students to develop other transferrable academic skills, i.e., the ones needed to research and write effectively for academic purposes.

For the major written assessment item, students are asked to gather three language examples of their own or they have heard in conversation with someone else, and, in the form of a case study, explain the choice of style, which particular feature (phonology, vocabulary, or grammar) identifies it as belonging to that specific style, and how the social setting and social relationship between speakers influenced this choice. Together with pre-assessment activities, the case study is designed to assist students to develop their ability to appropriately apply the sociolinguistic knowledge as well as discipline-specific and generic academic skills that they gain throughout the course to provide a critical and analytical reflection upon actual language use. The fact that students are invited to use their own real-life language data, furthermore, makes the task more meaningful, thereby enhancing student engagement and achievement (Jones et al., 2016; Tinto, 2011; Watson, 2015).

Despite a set of pre-assessment learning activities delivered by teaching staff to help students develop relevant competencies, some students still encountered difficulties with how to approach the case study topic, i.e., how to find and provide real-life language examples and critically reflect upon them. Hence, there was a need for an additional activity which would guide students through the process of analyzing language before they are asked to critically and analytically reflect upon their own use of language. To help make the relevant linguistic theory and academic practices more accessible for students, we turned to anchored instruction.

Anchored Instruction: Making Learning Relevant

Anchored instruction offers a viable alternative to traditional, fact-oriented approaches to education. Traditional methods have long been criticized for creating the so-called inert knowledge problem (Whitehead, 1929), which results in students' inability to apply knowledge to situations or contexts outside of the original learning environment. Anchored instruction has been developed to bridge this gap between learning and incorporating knowledge in real-life situations (Bransford et al., 1990).

Anchored instruction is a form of "situated cognition" (Brown et al., 1989; Duncan & Bamberry, 2010), where content is taught through realistic and authentic scenarios. Given that learning takes place in the context of meaningful activities, students thus perceive the new information as a tool for further learning rather than an end in itself (i.e., "inert knowledge problem"). What is more, the element of realism in the narrative component of anchored instruction shows students the relevance of their learning to everyday events, and thereby makes learning more engaging and content easier to remember (CTGV, 1991). As a result, students are more likely to apply knowledge to different situations, problems, or contexts outside of the original learning environment.

Anchored instruction is also seen as a type of "cognitive apprenticeship" (Collins et al., 1989), where the information presented is designed to be explored and discussed rather than simply perceived (CTGV, 1992). Being informed by principles of problem-based learning, anchored instruction recognizes the importance of providing learners with interactive, problem-based experiences, which encourage students to be active in the learning process and to take responsibility for their own learning (Grimes, 2019). For this, a richly designed problem and a student-centered problem-solving procedure (Hmelo-Silver, 2004) are incorporated into anchored activities. Being placed in a rich and factually authentic learning environment, students are more likely to become genuinely interested and actively involved in the construction of knowledge (Herrington & Oliver, 2000). They do not take content for granted, but instead question and explore it from different perspectives. They do not simply deal with ready-made issues, but instead identify and formulate approaches to solving problems on their own (Saye & Brush, 2002). Anchored instruction, thus, allows students to experience self-generated inquiry, which is essential for their successful transition to learning in higher education and beyond.

As with other forms of situated cognition and cognitive apprenticeship, anchored instruction regards learning as a function of the activity, context, and culture in which it occurs (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For students to gain expertise in a particular field, novices must, therefore, be presented with discipline-specific content that through interactive activities approximates or reproduces the ways in which knowledge is used in real-world situations (Herrington & Herrington, 2007). The point of difference with anchored instruction is that problem-solving tasks are introduced to students using anchors, which are based on familiar situations, stories, and characters. Within such anchors, knowledge and skills are contextualized to issues and problems that are relevant to the students' life experiences. This helps students to internalize relevant concepts and skills and to appropriately apply them to solve similar problems inside and outside academia (Berardi-Wiltshire & Petrucci, 2015).

In typical anchored instruction classrooms, students are first presented with an anchor, such as a video segment, and are invited to formulate strategies for solving the problem embedded in it. During this phase, students start taking ownership of the problem and are actively involved in generating a solution, all the while being guided by the teacher. Following that, students engage in a discussion related to the anchor, facilitated by the teacher. This way, students begin developing shared expertise around the anchor. After that, the teacher integrates analogous or extension problems into a written assessment, such as an essay, case study, or project assignment. Being based on the skills similar to those used in the initial scenarios, these learning activities require students to expand the anchor by researching related materials and to further use that knowledge to solve problems posed in the assignment. As a result, students are able to understand issues more deeply, and what is more, to strengthen or expand their cross-disciplinary competencies, such as critical thinking, reasoned analysis, problem-solving, and effective communication (Baumbach et al., 1995).

The design and use of anchored activities offer a unique instructional strategy for creating a meaningful, engaging learning environment, which is one of the principles of Nelson et al.'s (2012) transition pedagogy and Tinto's (2011) framework of a successful enabling learning community. As indicated by previous studies (Berardi-Wiltshire & Petrucci, 2015; Duncan & Bamberry, 2010; Kariuki & Duncan, 2004; Michael et al., 1993), anchored instruction helps novice learners to become more engaged and more efficient in higher education, thus contributing to their future success inside and outside academia (Zepke, 2013). While being applicable to courses across the alternative pathway and undergraduate programs and, furthermore, across different modes of teaching, the principles and strategies of anchored instruction are of particular relevance to teaching (socio)linguistics to non-linguists. The reason for that is that anchored activities can help to enhance the immediacy and interest in (socio)linguistics as a subject for students who are not pursuing linguistics as a major (Berardi-Wiltshire & Petrucci, 2015), and thereby allow them to gain expertise which they can further apply across a range of undergraduate degrees. The following sections will illustrate how the principles of anchored instruction have been incorporated into the course so that students may further practice and acquire core discipline-specific and relevant generic competencies.

Anchored Instruction: Practical Application within the Introductory Sociolinguistics Course

Being framed by the principles of anchored instruction, the enhanced pedagogy informing the course places greater focus on the development of knowledge and skills required for the real-time analysis of human interaction and self-reflection of language use in context. For students to practice and acquire relevant discipline-specific competencies, the content is introduced by means of a tailor-made, live-action (as opposed to animated), interactive, audio-visual teaching tool embedded within the university's learning management system, Canvas.

The teaching tool largely consists of three short videos of up to five minutes, each introduced by a linguistics instructor. Instead of incorporating pre-existing videos freely available online, the teaching staff created authentic videos, with the course and student cohort in mind. What is more, they used local characters, speaking local varieties of English in real, local settings, which the students would be familiar with.

First, the teaching staff wrote three scripts based on three real-life scenarios, which were tailored to meet the educational needs of novice learners taking the introductory sociolinguistics course. Each of the scripts shows conversations taking place between two or three characters. The plotline weaving the three scenarios together revolves around the main character of Jason, a young professional man. The first scenario involves Jason being called to his boss's office and told to work overtime, despite his desire to leave early that day. The second scenario is of Jason complaining to a colleague about not being able to meet with his girlfriend and mother for a special dinner that evening because of the overtime work he has to do. The third scenario is set the next day in a café, with Jason, his girlfriend, and his mother, talking about Jason's workplace and the undue pressure he is under. The reason for having the one character, Jason, in all three different scenarios is to enable students to observe both inter- and intra-individual variability in language use and, furthermore, to analyze how this variability is determined by the

setting and the relationship between the conversation partners.

To bring the scripts to life, the teaching staff liaised with the team at the university's Learning Design and Teaching Innovation (LDTI), who has a multi-camera production studio for the creation of educational videos. The teaching staff also recruited local actors for the videos: drama students from School of Creative Industries and fellow teachers with experience in acting. By collaborating with the LDTI team and the actors, the teaching staff were able to have the three videos filmed professionally, and what is more, in relatable social settings: an office, a staff kitchen, and a cafe on campus.

While watching the videos, students are carefully guided and challenged by the linguistic instructor, who mainly acts as a task facilitator in this case. The scenes featuring the linguistic instructor were filmed separately from the three scenario videos. Having been recorded in the production studio of the LDTI team, they were combined with the videos and learning activities using Panopto video content software. The teaching tool was then embedded into Canvas.

At the very beginning of the activity, the instructor introduces the task and provides a general outline of how the activity may assist students in developing expertise needed to reflect upon the ways language changes according to where it is spoken and who it is spoken to. Following that, the instructor tells students that they are going to see each video twice and clearly explains what to consider while watching them.

While watching each of the videos for the first time, students are asked to consider the relationship between Jason and his interlocutors and the linguistic evidence that has made them draw their conclusions about this relationship. Once students watch each of the videos for the first time, the instructor steps into the scenario and directly addresses the students by asking two short multiple-choice questions. The first one is related to the relationship between Jason and his interlocutor(s). On asking the question and providing the options, the instructor encourages students to think carefully before clicking on one of the answers appearing on the screen. If they click on the wrong answer, the relevant message pops up on the screen, with students being given an option to try again. If the students click on the correct answer, the instructor steps in and says, "Great job" or "Well done," and proceeds to the second question.

The next question targets the linguistic factors that have helped students to decide on the relationship between the interlocutors. Once students provide the correct answer, the instructor comments on the answer, explaining why it is the correct one. After that, students are invited to watch the same video for the second time paying attention to the key features of the language used by the speakers. This is followed by the relevant question. When the correct answer is given by the student, the instructor comments on the particularities of the language used.

Among the benefits of the teaching tool is its stand-alone nature, which stems from its asynchronous format, including learning activities and interactive feedback. Its online format allows students to easily access the tool, and to watch the videos and answer the questions more than once, at a time and pace of their choosing. Given that students are able to proceed only after they provide the correct response to the questions, the task thus prevents students from passively watching the videos. The presence of the instructor, who guides students through the learning activity, further ensures that students efficiently engage with the task, i.e., that they access and apply relevant discipline-specific knowledge and skills to analyze real-life language data. This approach is especially beneficial for novice learners with little or no background in learning (socio)linguistics.

Another advantage is that the instructor provides continuity by asking the same or very similar questions after each showing of each scenario. This (repeated) frame alongside the variations in the settings and characters between the videos is designed to assist students in recognizing that language does change between and within individuals according to the different factors of where and with whom it is used. Moreover, all videos capture familiar social settings (i.e., local actors in relatable local situations), which makes the content more likely to be applicable to students' real-life experiences. By allowing students to access and practice relevant discipline-specific knowledge and skills in an authentic learning environment, the teaching tool invites students to pay attention to the particularities of language both inside and outside the classroom, thereby bridging the gap between learning and incorporating knowledge in real-time situations.

At the very end, the instructor further invites students to engage in a group discussion around the issues related to the three videos, with a particular emphasis on their personal experience. This is done to further deepen students' understanding of the sociolinguistic concepts and strategies relevant to real-time analysis of human interaction and real-time self-reflection in context, and also to generate ideas for the case study assignment. The discussion takes place either synchronously in face-to-face or online classes, or asynchronously on the learning management system's discussion board. Students reflect upon the characteristics of the three interactions presented to them, share language use examples from their life and brainstorm how to use the information they got from the videos to analyze their own language data.

The group discussion following the videos is, furthermore, facilitated by the tutor/lecturer, whose role during this stage is particularly important. First of all, they help students to recall and examine relevant

discipline-specific theoretical and practical aspects, thereby furthering their learning. Secondly, teaching staff highlight the value of students' contributions, which enables students to gain confidence in their abilities and to appreciate the ways in which one's expertise is enhanced when other voices are part of the learning experience (Tinto, 2011). Being placed in a supportive cooperative environment, students are, therefore, able to further strengthen their discipline-specific knowledge and improve critical thinking, problem solving, and interpersonal skills (Johnson et al., 2010; Peltola, 2018). What is more, this learning experience gives them an opportunity to take control of their own engagement with the task and start transitioning into the role of an expert, which is of great benefit for students who are new to academia.

Outcomes of the Teaching Innovation: Students' Perspectives

The teaching tool, informed by anchored instruction pedagogy, has been embedded into two introductory sociolinguistics courses – a blended one and a purely online one, both of which run concurrently. Being used as a first pre-assessment item leading to the case study, it aims to provide timely guidance to students on how to critically think, analyze, and reflect upon real-life language data. To assess the effectiveness of the teaching tool, we sought feedback from the students who had completed the course in either 2019 or in 2020, in either online or blended mode. For this, an anonymous online questionnaire was used.

The obtained feedback was consistent across the student cohorts enrolled in the course. All the students indicated that a thorough explanation of the purpose of the activity helped them "to clearly identify their responsibilities" and, thereby, increase their task engagement from the very beginning. A few students also pointed out that they benefited from having specific instructions repeated each time they were about to watch a scene. According to the students, this gave them a clear idea of what to pay attention to in each case and, as a result, made it easy for them to navigate the task. The fact that the instructor spoke concisely and in plain, accessible language further helped the students to successfully work through the learning activity. As for the questions asked by the instructor, they were also said to be clearly defined and posed in an easy-to-understand manner. Given that they were directly related to the instructions and came with choices, the students felt they were "carefully guided towards the correct response." Moreover, the positive reinforcement provided by the instructor was shown to encourage the students to engage more deeply with the questions and videos.

Apart from the task instructions and questions, the students responded positively to the content and audio-visual format of the teaching tool. According to the students, the fact that the learning activity was anchored around real-life interactions allowed them to further develop their current understanding of the course content: how physical setting and social relationships influence language variation. As indicated by one student, the learning activity helped them to "clarify that language choice and behavior depend not only on the setting people are in but also on the relationship between the interlocutors." The audio-visual format of the teaching tool was also seen as an advantage by the students. It added "another unique dimension that one does not get to experience when writing an exam or answering short questions" related to the learning materials. As said by one student, "seeing actual scenarios played out helped me to apply this knowledge to 'real life' situations and how the information we have received in lectures 'looks' when in action." This idea was shared by the other students who also pointed out that having real-life interactions presented to them as videos allows them to grasp and retain the information.

Overall, the students found the teaching tool to be "an enjoyable learning experience." They particularly liked its informative, interactive, and engaging nature, and mentioned that they "went through the activity more than once when preparing for the assessments." Given that this experience helped them to better grasp the course content, quiz their knowledge, and apply knowledge to practice, the students stated that having the teaching tool incorporated into the course "as a learning tool, pre-assessment activity or an assessment item" can greatly benefit other students. As highlighted by one student, the learning activity is "of a great benefit, especially for beginners, as it allows them to see how much they have learnt and areas they need to investigate further." What is more, they emphasized the effectiveness of the teaching-learning tool across the modes of learning and expressed the hope to see similar learning activities being introduced in other courses.

Conclusions

The teaching tool described in this paper was developed in accordance with the principles of anchored instruction to help novice learners taking the introductory sociolinguistics course within the alternative pathway program develop the skills needed to analyze human interaction and language use in context. In our experience, supported by positive feedback from our students, there are significant benefits in linking course content with real-world issues and authentic scenarios using an anchored instruction approach, especially when teaching students who have limited or no prior experience in either the higher education learning environment or in the discipline.

The use of the tailor-made, live-action, interactive, audio-visual teaching tool within the course led to positive impacts on student engagement and performance in both online and blended student cohorts. Specifically, being placed in a factually rich, authentic, online learning environment and carefully guided by means of pre-recorded interactive feedback, the students engaged more deeply with the course content. As a result of their active involvement in the construction of knowledge and an opportunity to apply theory to specific spoken contexts, the students were able to further strengthen their discipline-specific knowledge: how language varies between and within the speakers according to the speakers' language identities, the relationships between them, and the physical setting they are in. Apart from enhancing their sociolinguistic competencies, the ability to actively participate in scaffolded critical and reflective thinking allowed students to improve their critical and analytical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are essential for success inside and outside academia. The teaching tool incorporated into the course can, therefore, allow teachers to meet the learning needs and interests of novice learners studying sociolinguistics in both online and blended modes.

Given the content of the videos and the skills embedded in the learning activities accompanying them, the teaching tool may also be of a particular benefit to other humanities and social science disciplines, especially to those requiring self-reflection in context, and to those incorporating a case study as part of their assessment structure. In the case of novice learners, who need more practice and scaffolding to acquire relevant competencies, the videos can be used together with embedded learning activities and interactive feedback as a graded or ungraded pre-assessment activity. In the case of more competent students, the teaching tool can be modified and used as an assessment item. For example, the recorded video(s) can be incorporated into a case study assignment, requiring students to analyze and critically reflect upon the inter- and intraindividual variation of the language spoken in the video(s). In addition to commenting on the given language examples, students may further be asked to provide and analyze their own examples. Also, the teaching tool can be incorporated as a learning activity into social communication courses, with the videos acting as an anchor to facilitate a discussion on the characteristics of language use in different social settings, which, in turn, may lead to a written assessment, such as an essay, case study or other project assignment requiring students to expand the anchor.

By extension, the innovative pedagogies integral to this project can have a practical application to other alternative pathway and undergraduate courses. In line with the previous studies, the use of the teaching tool based on anchored instruction was shown to create an effective learning environment that helps students to engage in the learning process in a more meaningful way (Berardi-Wiltshire & Petrucci, 2015; Duncan & Bamberry, 2010; Kariuki & Duncan, 2004; Michael et al., 1993) and thereby to develop both discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary competencies. Given this skillset is a bedrock of success in higher education and beyond, anchored learning activities are of great benefit to all students, especially to those who are completely new to academia. Hence, anchored instruction, manifested in the teaching tool presented above, offers a unique, adaptable instructional strategy to encourage and/or assess student learning at the pathway and undergraduate levels, and what is more, across disciplines and modes of teaching.

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