The visibility and presence of academic oracy practices in university preparation courses

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

University preparation pathways develop students' understanding of literacy practices for degree-level study. However, despite the crucial role of academic speaking and listening, or oracy, in student success at university, the extent to which it forms part of these courses' literacy practices remains unclear. Ten university preparation (enabling) educators in Australia participated in semi-structured interviews about their understanding and awareness of practices in teaching oracy as part of university preparation courses. There was a variable level of awareness of oracy as a term among participants. The move to online teaching was highlighted as one of the barriers to explicit oracy teaching. More explicit recognition of the role of academic oracy in student success, as well as explicit embedding of academic oracy in the curriculum of preparatory courses, could be particularly beneficial. It is argued that this would allow students to fully engage and participate in their future university study.

Full paper

Introduction

Academic speaking and listening (known as oracy) are crucial for accessing academic discourse at university (Mauranen, 2012), yet the literature has highlighted a lack of focus on oracy practices in higher education contexts (Doherty et al., 2011; Heron, 2019; Heron et al., 2023). Expectations from teachers about how to develop students' academic oracy practices are often tacit, resulting in a situation where students are expected to come to higher education with adequate academic speaking and listening as pre-requisites.

Since many students arrive at university having had limited or disrupted schooling experiences (Syme, et al., 2022), university preparation pathways (e.g., enabling education courses in Australia, access courses or foundation years in the UK) are often offered by higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop students' understanding of literacy practices to ensure they meet degree pre-requisites (Baker et al., 2022; Klinger & Murray, 2012). Yet, a national audit of literacy practices in these courses and programs has shown that they appear to be more focused on academic reading and writing, than academic speaking and listening (Baker & Irwin, 2015).

Strong oracy can support students to better engage, argue, and connect with their learning, peers, and educators at university. Given the important role of university preparation courses in the widening participation agenda, and their goal to support students from diverse backgrounds in their access to higher education, if there is an absence of explicit teaching of academic speaking and listening practices, this runs 'counter to equity principles' (Klinger & Murray, 2012, p. 27). Therefore, the aims of this research were to explore the visibility and presence of oracy in the understanding, awareness and teaching practices of educators who teach into the university preparation space.

Method

Following institutional ethics board approval, a call for participants was put out via the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA)'s newsletter. Ten university preparation (enabling) educators, who teach into university preparation programmes and courses across universities within Australia, were recruited from six HEIs across three states of Australia. One-to-one semi-structured interviews, lasting 45-60 minutes, were conducted. During each interview, the oracy skills framework (Mercer et al., 2017) was also shown to participants and used as a prompt to encourage participants to identify oracy in their practices. Transcripts were then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Findings

There was a wide acknowledgement among participants of the importance of oracy for university study:

"if oracy is about being able to speak fluently or being able to comprehend things, it's essential for any course, like how are students meant to engage in a group discussion in any course on any, you know, topic or subject matter, without having strong oracy skills?" (P5)

Yet, for many of the participants, there appeared to be a lack of awareness of the term oracy:

"I think oracy is not [a] widely… known entity. I think it's part of the hidden curriculum, especially in undergraduate [studies]." (P4)

There was also significant variability in how explicitly educators incorporated oracy activities into their teaching practices:

"I think that from my experience of my own context, the explicitness with which oracy is taught is very patchwork." (P6)

Barriers to incorporating oracy in teaching practices were also highlighted, particularly due to many classes now being solely taught online:

"[It is] a bit harder online I find. So the only other thing would be using breakout rooms [where students] will have to discuss something." (P10)

"But going into online, it's far harder to sort of mandate speaking activities in a way." (P6)

"we don't ask the students to deliver the [assessment] as an oral presentation, which is partially just because of the technical side of things. It's an online course and so you'd have to teach like how to record the presentation and that we don't have like time in the course." (P4)

Discussion

The findings indicate that the majority of teaching related to oracy within university preparation courses appears to be done implicitly, with logistical constraints, and potentially a lack of awareness of oracy and how to teach it, preventing more purposeful development of students' academic speaking and listening. There could be value in increasing awareness of the concept of oracy and its links to academic success. There could also be more explicit embedding of academic oracy in the curriculum of preparatory courses, since it is our contention that university preparation courses provide a valuable site for developing oracy practices, so that students can fully engage and participate in future university study.

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