Building knowledge to ease troublesomeness: Affording theory knowledgeability through academic reading circles

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Abstract

Academic reading for knowledge building is under-researched in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP); a field that foregrounds academic writing above all other skills. Alongside this dearth of literature, a relative wealth of literature exists which identifies the 'troublesomeness' of academic reading. This paper argues that reading for knowledge building is one way to ease the troublesomeness of academic reading within the field of EAP, with a focus on reading to build knowledge of theory and theory use. This paper reports on findings from a study which explores how taught postgraduates on a pre-sessional course acquire the threshold concept of 'theory knowledgeability' (Cowley-Haselden 2020) through reading and discussion. 'Theory knowledgeability' can be defined as not just acquiring knowledge of how to use theory in academic practice, but also acquiring knowledge of particular theory/ theories themselves. This knowledge is one key to unlocking success in postgraduate level education. Through the analysis of knowledge practices within academic reading circles performed by postgraduate pre-sessional students from a range of disciplines within the social sciences, it is argued that acquiring the threshold concept of theory knowledgeability allows students to emerge as a more legitimate knower in the UK higher education context.

Keywords

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Abstract

Academic reading for knowledge building is under-researched in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP); a field that foregrounds academic writing above all other skills. Alongside this dearth of literature, a relative wealth of literature exists which identifies the 'troublesomeness' of academic reading. This paper argues that reading for knowledge building is one way to ease the troublesomeness of academic reading within the field of EAP, with a focus on reading to build knowledge of theory and theory use. This paper reports on findings from a study which explores how taught postgraduates on a pre-sessional course acquire the threshold concept of 'theory knowledgeability' (Cowley-Haselden 2020) through reading and discussion. 'Theory knowledgeability' can be defined as not just acquiring knowledge of how to use theory in academic practice, but also acquiring knowledge of particular theory/ theories themselves. This knowledge is one key to unlocking success in postgraduate level education. Through the analysis of knowledge practices within academic reading circles performed by postgraduate pre-sessional students from a range of disciplines within the social sciences, it is argued that acquiring the threshold concept of theory knowledgeability allows students to emerge as a more legitimate knower in the UK higher education context.

Keywords

Academic reading, EAP, theory knowledgeability, Legitimation Code Theory

Introduction

Many university level international students who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) and wish to study in the UK are required to embark on preparatory courses before progressing to their academic degree. These courses are aimed at enabling students to meet the respective academic and/or language entry requirements of their chosen degree via Foundation programmes or via English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes (known as Pre-Sessional courses in the UK). EAP has been defined as "language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts. It means grounding instruction in an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines" (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons 2002, p. 2). Although this may sound rather holistic, in reality within EAP pedagogy and research the onus has traditionally been placed on academic writing. There is sound logic to this as EAP's raison d'être is to prepare students for success in their academic studies, and this success is overwhelmingly measured by written output. However, this does mean that the other skills are fairly neglected. Reading in EAP is often not analysed in its own right but in conjunction with writing (Delaney 2008; Windsor & Park 2014; Dovey 2010; Gebril & Plakans 2016) and hence the focus is on source use (McCulloch, 2013; Payant et al, 2019) and paraphrasing (Hirvela & Du 2013). Reading is explored as a skill that needs to be honed to improve academic writing, rather than as a practice that enables the accumulation of knowledge in and of itself.

This paper is concerned with exploring reading as knowledge building on a Pre-Sessional course for taught postgraduate students in a post-'92 university in the UK. The paper outlines arguments for academic reading as social practice and a threshold concept. The paper details findings from a qualitative study, the aim of which is to explore the co-construction of knowledge through the discussion of academic reading focused on theory and whether this develops 'theory knowledgeability' in students. 'Theory knowledgeability' can be defined as not just acquiring knowledge of how to use theory in academic practice (the ability to convert theory into practice), but also acquiring knowledge of particular theory/ theories themselves. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK (QAA) highlights that master's students should develop "the ability to convert theory into practice from a critical and informed perspective" (2015, p. 6). This ability is valorised in numerous higher education settings around the world yet is not often addressed on pre-sessional courses. This study aims to offer some solution to fill this void on pre-sessional courses and go some way to developing EAL students as legitimate knowers in a UK higher education context.

EAL students who come to the UK to undertake postgraduate courses often have to 'hit the ground running'. Predominantly, these students will have had a very different experience at undergraduate level in their country where key skills such as converting theory into practice are less valorised than in the UK context. These students will also most likely have studied IELTs prior to undertaking their pre-sessional course. This language proficiency test does not help develop essential academic skills in students. Therefore, whatever their discipline, students have a very limited time to socialise into 'postgraduateness' before starting their master's programmes. This study is a small step in an attempt to consider how EAP can best help address this issue, ensuring that EAL postgraduate students are inducted into legitimated academic practices. The questions at the heart of this study

are: What happens when postgraduate pre-sessional students discuss theory? What impact does this have on their knowledge practices? And, what are the potential implications for EAP pedagogy?

Academic reading as social practice

Much has been written about academic writing as social practice, in particular since the inception of the highly influential Academic Literacies via Lea and Street (1998). While this proliferation of literature has done much to highlight the importance of writing as social practice within EAP (see for example the work of Ken Hyland, John Flowerdew and Theresa Lillis), little attention has been paid to reading as social practice. Through a scoping study of literature related to academic reading, Baker et al. (2019) highlight the invisibility of academic reading as social practice. While this is a valid point, Baker et al. (2019) simply highlight the issues rather than making an attempt to address the gaps they identify, and clearly much work in this area is needed. Like Baker et al (2019) and Abbot (2013), Bharuthram and Clarence (2015) also bemoan the lack of attention paid to academic reading, especially given its key role in helping students acculturate into a given academic discipline, that is learning how to 'be' in academia from exposure to a discipline's idiosyncratic behaviour, values, thinking and communication. Abbot (2013) concludes that lecturers believe that in order for students to develop a critical understanding of a text, they should enter into a dialogue with it, developing their own ideas. The idea of opening up dialogue around a text is at the heart of this study, though not simply between text and reader (as in Abbot's case), but between a group of students and text and therefore literally opening up space for dialogue. The critical understanding of the text in this study is socially constructed via group discussions. These discussions follow Seburn's (2016) Academic Reading Circles (ARC) model, which enables students to collaboratively develop deeper comprehension of a text by engaging "with a text through different lenses that draw attention to specific types of information, and … co-construct[ing] knowledge discovered from these lenses for a clearer overall picture of the meaning and significance of the text" (p. 6). That is not to say that a unanimous and uniform understanding is desired, on the contrary. Rather the idea is that students mediate their own meaning through discussion with their peers and that from this they become socialised into some of the legitimated practices of academia.

Academic reading as threshold concept

Bharuthram and Clarence (2015, p. 43) cite Bharuthram (2012) to highlight that legitimated learning "at university [includes] the ability to read relevant texts critically, and analyse, synthesise and evaluate knowledge is a common requirement at all levels of study". Although this is addressing higher education in South Africa, UK-based Abbot (2013) concurs in his study of threshold crossing in academic reading. The notion of threshold concepts was developed by Meyer and Land (2003, p. 4) and essentially involves "a transformed perspective [which] is likely to involve an affective component – a shift in values, feeling or attitude". It is these transformative and affective elements that distinguish a threshold concept from a core concept within a discipline. Acquiring this transformed perspective is often troublesome and is characterised by time spent within the 'liminal space' (the space occupied by a learner as they acquire a threshold concept – for some this will be relatively plain sailing, for others it can cause feelings of being 'stuck'). Many threshold concepts have been identified within various fields of undergraduate study (Meyer & Land 2005; Meyer & Land 2012; Land, Meyer & Smith 2008). More recently, interdisciplinary, generic skills have been

identified as threshold concepts in academic writing (Adler-Kassner & Wardle 2015) and within the arena of doctoral study, the use of reading and theorising (Kiley & Wisker 2009; Wisker 2015; Kiley 2009). Whilst the majority of threshold concepts literature has been focused on undergraduate and doctoral level studies, this study is concerned with master's level study. Not the use of reading *for* writing as is the focus with Abbott and Kiley and Wisker, or the ability to theorise, but the use of reading to build knowledge of and about theory, therefore, acquiring the threshold concept of 'theory knowledgeability' (Cowley-Haselden 2020).

Work within threshold concepts is not without its critics. Nicola-Richmond et al. (2018) have observed that the prolific identification of troublesome concepts is often at the expense of empirical rigour, arguing that threshold concepts are regularly self-identified without sufficient justification, or with sparse details regarding identification and research methods. The identification of 'theory knowledgeability' is perhaps guilty of this. However, the current study is not aiming to contribute to the ever-multiplying list of threshold concepts, rather, the aim is to name the troublesomeness of using theory in academic practice. Although Nicola-Richmond et al.'s (2018) criticism of research rigour within threshold concepts is valid, there have been no attempts to discredit the notion that academic reading and theorising are troublesome for students. Another criticism of threshold concepts literature is that little work has been done to gain insight into what happens within the liminal space students invariably occupy when trying to acquire said troublesome knowledge/ skills, especially when it comes to analysing discourse within the liminal (Cowley-Haselden 2020). This study aims to explicitly address the omission of discourse analysis in threshold concepts work to date.

The study

> *'I think we don't know what is theory. We can explain in a dictionary way but when we talk about theory use we are stuck'* [Cf1: pilot 2015]

As mentioned above, this research is driven by the questions: What happens when postgraduate pre-sessional students discuss theory? What impact does this have on knowledge practices? And what are the potential implications for EAP pedagogy?

Context

The data reported on in this paper is one part of data collected for a PhD study. The study took place on a 6-week summer EAP pre-sessional course at a post '92 university over the course of two years (2017 and 2018). This is a high-stakes course whereby successful completion is a prerequisite to undertaking academic studies in the autumn term. Given the high-stakes nature of the course the study took place in off syllabus 'free' sessions. Participants were assured that participation was voluntary and if students preferred not to take part in the research, they could still participate in the activities. The researcher was the course director of the pre-sessional course at the time. This could have raised issues around how comfortable students would have been to decline to participate and only one student from the two years did decline. The data discussed here was collected from 6 participants in the summer of 2018. The participants were from China, Thailand and Bangladesh and were progressing on to master's courses in the Faculty of Business and Law and the Faculty of

Education. Ethics was approved for the project from both the researcher's place of work and the institution supervising the PhD.

Methods

To address the research questions, participants were given 3 texts to discuss over a series of 4 sessions, each lasting approximately 40 minutes. The study design entailed the participants using the Academic Reading Circle (ARC) model (designed by Seburn, 2016) while reading a series of texts chosen to scaffold their understanding of theory and how a particular theory can be applied to different disciplines and to the everyday. The first text provided a discussion of what theory is (in a Management context), the second text explored the theory of Semiotics using fairly 'everyday' examples from society and the third reading was a text exploring Semiotics within the individual participant's undergraduate degree area of specialism (therefore the group discussed 6 different texts in this discussion). The final discussion was based on revisiting the previous 3 texts.

For the ARC process students were assigned one of six roles (Discussion Leader, Connector, Contextualiser, Visualiser, Summariser, and Highlighter) designed to foster more critical and engaged reading. Students read the assigned text and prepared their role prior to joining an in-class group discussion (it should be highlighted that although these discussions took place in the classroom, there was no researcher or teacher involvement or intervention). The main data reported on here was collected via videoing the ARC discussions and then the discussions were transcribed by the researcher for analysis. During transcription, participants were anonymised and assigned a code purely for differentiation purposes. The data was transcribed verbatim to include errors with grammar and vocabulary. Inaudible utterances were identified in the transcription. The data was then analysed in 'moves' rather than clauses or turns. Moves may comprise of a clause, a sentence or several sentences, the distinguishing factor being that the move is relative to particular strength of semantic gravity within the translation device devised for translating between theory and data (see below).

Theoretical framework - Legitimation Code Theory

This paper analyses knowledge practices within the ARC discussions using the framework of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (what follows will provide only a brief overview of LCT, for a more in-depth introduction to LCT see Maton (2014), and Maton, Hood and Shay (2016)). As this research is concerned with notions of academic reading within EAP as social practice and enabling access to legitimated practices in UK higher education it is logical to analyse the data through a sociological lens. LCT builds on the work of Basil Bernstein and provides a toolkit for uncovering what constitutes legitimate knowledge and knowers in a given context and therefore enabling access to education through uncovering 'the rules of the game' (Maton 2014).

> LCT concepts reveal the 'rules of the game' shaping different arenas of social life, such as education. Such bases of achievement are typically tacit, so actors whose social backgrounds do not equip them with keys to these 'legitimation codes' are disadvantaged. By making the codes visible, LCT enables the rules of the game to be taught and learned or changed, advancing social justice (Legitimation Code Theory 2019a).

As mentioned above, Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) was born from the work of Basil Bernstein. It follows in Bernstein's footsteps in reaching for the greater goal of uncovering the obstacles to success for many within education (and beyond) and achieving some form of social justice. "LCT is a sociological toolkit for the study of practice" (Maton 2013, p. 10), and in particular knowledge practices. LCT takes a social realist position on knowledge, meaning knowledge is real and is socially produced (Maton 2013), as such knowledge can be analysed as an object in its own right (Maton 2014). Maton (2014, p. 15) is keen to highlight that, "LCT is a practical theory rather than a paradigm, a conceptual toolkit and analytic methodology rather than an '-ism', and sociological rather than philosophical". As will be seen in the next section, LCT encourages a unique two-way dialogue between theory and data.

There are three widely employed dimensions within LCT (Specialization, Semantics and Autonomy), however this paper is only concerned with the dimension of Semantics. 'The dimension of Semantics explores the context-dependence and complexity of practices, dispositions and contexts' (Legitimation Code Theory 2019b). Context dependence is explored through semantic gravity and complexity through semantic density. Together the analysis of semantic gravity and semantic density affords a rich insight into how knowledge builds over time, however it is also possible to analyse these aspects of Semantics independently (Maton 2014) thus, this paper focuses on semantic gravity alone.

> *Semantic gravity* (SG) refers to the degree to which meaning relates to its context. Semantic gravity may be relatively stronger (+) or weaker (-) along a continuum of strengths. The stronger the semantic gravity (SG+), the more meaning is dependent on its context; the weaker the semantic gravity (SG-), the less dependent meaning is on its context (Maton 2013, p. 11).

Context in this study is the text or texts being discussed within the ARC. Thus, stronger semantic gravity (SG+) refers to comments made about the text and its contents and weaker semantic gravity (SG-) relates to comments that extend the text content to other, more generalised, contexts.

Translation Device

One criticism of qualitative research can be that is it often not generalisable. However, thick description of data can afford transferability (Mackey & Gass 2005). LCT affords this thick description through utilizing translation devices: "A key task in LCT is … to establish the empirical realizations of concepts within each specific phenomenon and to make this explicit in the form of a 'translation device' that relates concepts to data" (Maton & Chen 2020, p. 41). The translation device ensures that there is constant interactivity between theory and data by enabling clear paths between theory and data and data and theory. For the purposes of analysing the data for this study it was necessary to develop a translation device to map the concept of semantic gravity to the data (table 1). This translation device has been honed via several trips back and forth between the analytical concepts and the data and also via discussions with a peer working within the field of EAP and also the LCT framework. The translation device has been developed for a wider PhD study and therefore includes data from other ARC groups and discussions. The far left of the translation device indicates

the continuum of semantic gravity with increasing gradations as the table moves towards the right, ending in examples from the data to exemplify these gradations.

The extremes of context dependence and therefore semantic gravity within the discussions are whether turns are grounded within the text under discussion (SG+) or whether the turns extend beyond the context of this one given text (SG-). For example, turns focus only on the information within the text under discussion or they are concerned with information not within the confines of the text. Therefore, the first macro distinction of the data is separated somewhat simplistically between Grounded and Beyond respectively. Following on from this it is possible to refine gradations further. Within Grounded it is possible to distinguish between mere administration of the discussion - controlling who contributes and what is discussed (Administration) - and summarising the text (Summary). Beyond can be further refined into Empirical and Academic. Empirical is realised by the participant offering examples to further make sense of the information within the text. Academic is when the participant is able to see connections between the information in the text under discussion (our context) and other texts beyond the assigned reading (other contexts).

It is possible to differentiate the data once more within the Administration, Summary, Empirical and Academic distinctions. The final micro level of gradation within Administration is People and Topic. Here speakers simply act as discussion administrators, ensuring speakers contribute and the discussion taking place maintains momentum. Weakening SG occurs through Summary. Here we can distinguish between Reproducing, where the speaker simply quotes from the text and does little else to contextualise the quote or offer any interpretation of it and Paraphrasing, where the participant summarises the content within the text using their own words and manages to translate the information in the text in order to better comprehend the information. This information is however, still grounded within the context of the text.

Even weaker SG as represented by Empirical and Academic can be further refined into Personalising and Generalising and Bridging and Reaching respectively. Personalising is where the speaker offers a personal example related to information within the text (though not confined to the text) that they can identify with. Generalising is similar in that an example is provided, however rather than an example from personal experience, the example offered is related to more generalisable experience and observations. Bridging weakens SG further still by moving beyond the text and making connections between the text under discussion and other texts discussed in previous ARCs. The weakest SG in this data comes in the form of Reaching beyond the context of the reading discussed and abstracting/ generalising information across to other contexts.

Findings

Semantic profiles of the ARCs

Below are the semantic profiles of the four ARC discussions. Each 'move' within the discussion has been coded according to the translation device and can therefore be plotted on the semantic gravity continuum.

Coding of data along the semantic gravity continuum			Examples from data
SG- Beyond the text Grounded in text **SG+**	Academic	Reaching	**Iqm1 [study 2 group 2 2018]:** *but I think yeah the theory or theories sometimes you can see that sometimes some theory appear and another disappear that depend on yeah some expert or scientists or researchers maybe search in this field and maybe refute some theory because after get some evidence and examples experience maybe can use this to refute some theory but still a lot of theory still reliable*
		Bridging	**Cf1 [study 1 group 1 2017]:** *I think it is very similar because from the last article the author told me the theory come from the reality ….* **Cm4 [study 1 group 1 2017]:** *So this article as a specific example for the last article*
	Empirical	Generalising	**Cm1 [Study 1 Group 2 2017]:** *I have another point that semiotics is useful for our life when you met a new people a new person you look at his face his clothes and that is the semiotics you know that people who is maybe is polite people or maybe he don't want to make friends with you maybe they're some you can't it hard to communication with him because the signs in the face or in the clothes or from he or her behaviours we use this in the daily life use more frequently in the daily life I think this is useful*
		Personalising	**Cf2 [Study 2 group 1 2018]:** *for example in my teaching experience … I will offer some method to them to help them to improve their English levels but sometimes I feel confused because I don't know whether my activities can applied to the student situation or whether it is effective method for them to learn so if I want to solve that problem maybe I can find some theory because the theory often can tell me what a theory is and it can be applied to which kind of situation*
	Summary	Paraphrasing	**Tf4 [study 2 group 1 2018]:** *then I would like to summarise my article structural aesthetics what we see is not always what we expect this article it will state that [inside?] about the semiotic relate with the aesthetic of the building he suggest that the building is responsibility between the architecture and the engineer*
		Reproducing	**Bf1 [study 1 group 1 2017]:** *Yes according to OED dictionary "a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something"* [quoted from text p. 222] *this is called theory*
	Administration	Topic	**Tm1 [study 2 group 2 2018]:** *Ok now we already know about the author and I want to add a little question what do you think why he want to write this article with semiotics and society?*
		People	**Tf3 [study 2 group 2 2018]:** *So Today we discuss about what is theory article so let [Cf2] tell us about the author*

Table 1: Translation device
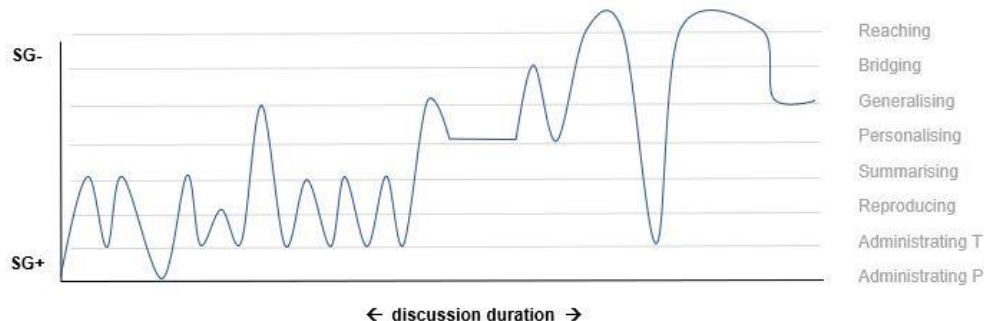
Semantic Profile of ARC 1

Figure 1: Semantic profile of ARC 1

In the first ARC discussion the participants come together to discuss a text that explores 'What is Theory?' There is no Visualiser present as the student is absent. Although this is the first ARC of this study, participants are familiar with the format as the ARCs form their speaking assessments on their Pre-Sessional course. This discussion is early on in the course and participants are still being fairly mechanical in their performance of this task taking turns to contribute as instructed by the Discussion Leader. Therefore, what we see at the beginning of this discussion is a fairly regular oscillation between the Discussion Leader administrating the shift from information about context and key terms to summaries of the article content. The Contextualiser summarises the careers of the authors and the Highlighter defines key terms by summarising definitions from the text. All these turns are very much grounded in the context of the text and so SG is relatively strong. The Discussion Leader asks for an example of a theory and the Connector begins to weaken SG as he offers a general example of the theory of evolution by way of contributing to the group's definition of the term. The discussion then continues with an exploration of how other key terms connect within the article. There is then a significant weakening of semantic gravity in the discussion when the Discussion Leader asks the group to provide examples of theories from their own life experiences. The participants then offer examples of using theories to improve their teaching practice, and examples of using theory in their previous undergraduate Civil Engineering and Business studies. These examples are personal to the participants' experiences however, the Connector has researched a new example of a theory to share with the group in line with his ARC role. This is the only example of Bridging in this discussion as the participant introduces a new article and connects this to the article being discussed, therefore moving away from the specific context of the text under discussion and weakening SG still further. It is understandable that this is the only example of Bridging in this discussion as this is the first text discussed and therefore, there is little other reading to connect the text to at this point. The discussion then moves on to examine the differences in theory in different disciplines, with an acknowledgment that theories within social sciences are recycled and amended and theories within sciences are more fixed. Theory use depends on the problem. The strengthening and weakening of the semantic gravity in this ARC is largely controlled by the Discussion Leader.
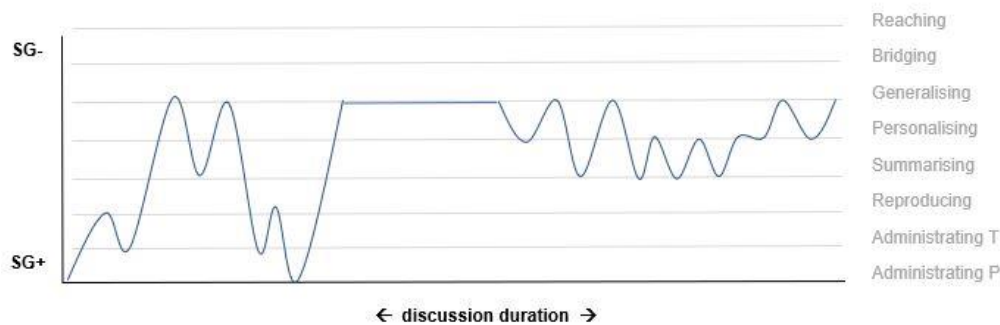
Semantic Profile of ARC 2

Figure 2: Semantic profile of ARC 2

The second ARC involved the group discussing a new article that introduces them to the theory of Semiotics using examples from society. Roles have been reassigned, meaning that the various roles are performed by a different member of the group. Again, the participant performing the Visualiser role is absent. The Discussion Leader begins the discussion by asking the participants to introduce themselves and their roles. The Contextualiser then gives the group information about the author, though this is quoted from Wikipedia and thus is simple reproduction (SG+). The Discussion Leader then asks the group why they think the author wrote the article, this levitates the discussion towards SG- as the responses begin to move between generalised justification of applying Semiotics to society (making an abstract concept more accessible) and summarising the content of the article. The Discussion Leader then asks the Highlighter to introduce the important vocabulary for understanding the article. The Highlighter defines Semiotics quoting from Wikipedia. The Summariser then begins to summarise the article but very quickly begins to offer generalised examples to help understand the content of the article. Almost all participants contribute here, offering examples and visuals to co-construct an understanding of signs, icons, symbols and indexes. The discussion continues this oscillation between Summarising, Generalising and Personalising as the group move between ideas in the text and offering examples from society and their individual cultures and experiences to aid their comprehension. Therefore, the majority of the discussion maintains a relatively middling SG. Interestingly, although the Connector is present, there is no attempt in this discussion to connect this text with the 'What is Theory?' text from the first ARC and so we see no Bridging in this discussion. The discussion also does not levitate to Reaching as the discussion stays grounded in the text.
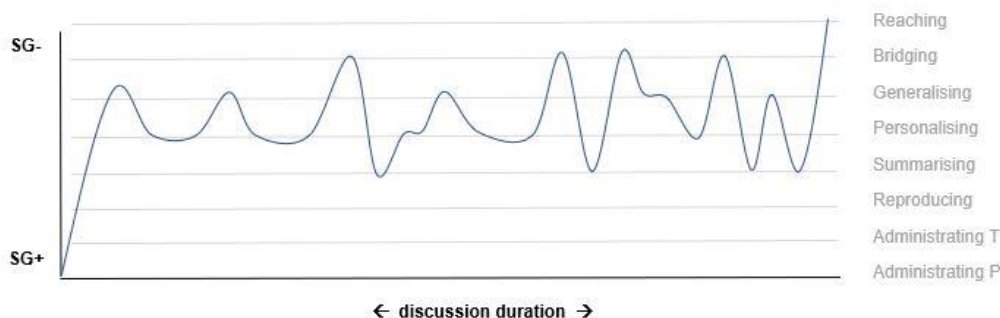
Semantic Profile of ARC 3

Figure 3: Semantic profile of ARC 3

In the third ARC the group are no longer constrained by the ARC roles and each participant has a text that explores Semiotics from within their undergraduate discipline. The rationale for this is that the participants would see a theory they are new to in the context of a subject they are familiar with. This third discussion is understandably longer than the previous two (lasting just over an hour as opposed to the average of 34 minutes) as the participants have to summarise their individual articles and have discussion questions to ask their groups. The discussion begins with one of the participants introducing themselves, their undergraduate studies and the topic of their article. They then proceed to highlight key terms, contextualise the article, summarise the main point and visualise by showing the group images that offer general examples related to the content of their article. The participant then asks the group to personalise this information by offering their own examples before choosing the next participant to discuss their article. This pattern is repeated by all 5 participants. Despite the fact that there are multiple articles being discussed, very little Bridging occurs between the speakers or between this third article and the previous two. The only example of Bridging occurs when one participant connects their article with another text that they have read related to their discipline, not the texts discussed in this intervention. The majority of this discussion occurs in middling SG.
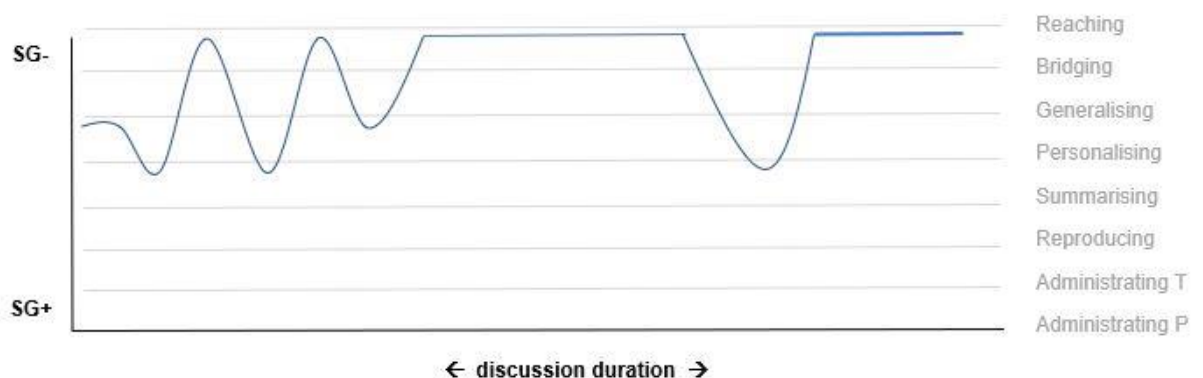
Semantic Profile of ARC 4

Figure 4: Semantic profile of ARC 4

The final ARC did not involve the reading of a new article, rather the participants were asked to revisit the three articles already discussed. This final discussion was the shortest of the 4 (at a length of just over 21 minutes). Perhaps not surprisingly, with no specific text to discuss, the conversation exists in an almost constant state of levitation toward SG-. The conversation is almost exclusively Generalising, Bridging and Reaching as the participants endeavour to make connections between the articles and relate these connections to their own experience and studies.

Conclusion

This paper asked what happens when postgraduate pre-sessional students discuss theory and what impact does this have on knowledge practices? And, what are the potential implications for EAP pedagogy? The semantic profiling of the discussions has illustrated that students operate within the full range of semantic gravity, but occupy different ranges at different stages.

Providing students with the opportunity to build their knowledge over a series of discussions and providing them with a model like ARC, affords them the ability to roam the full continuum more comfortably. When content is challenging for students they often cannot move beyond the text, therefore this unrestricted movement across the spectrum over the course of the 4 discussions is potential evidence that the troublesomeness of the reading is eased. The final ARC illustrates the ease with which students can make connections between their readings and beyond when they have the opportunity to build knowledge over time.

There are limitations to this study. The semantic profiles are heuristic and arguably subjective. It is hoped, however, that the constant return trips between data and theory to revise the translation device and discussions with knowledgeable peers goes some way to mitigate this. It is also rather difficult to fully appreciate the value of the Visualiser role in these discussions as those participants were absent in the first and second ARCs. This paper deals with a small part of the data collected for the PhD study, therefore it remains to be seen as to whether the patterns in this data are replicated across the other cohorts in the study. What this initial data suggests is that EAP pedagogy could benefit from a greater focus on reading. Not just reading as an aid to writing, but, the use of reading as social practice to build knowledge. There is much to be said about the role reading as social practice plays in the students' ability to build knowledge and ability to apply the reading to other contexts. In this case developing theory knowledgeability and enabling students to become a step closer to understanding legitimated postgraduate practice.

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