

Learning Specialist or Learning Developer... what's in a name?

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I am a learning developer with the University of Waikato's Student Learning team. I have been in this role for the past three years. But I have been in the student learning space for a lot more than this time. In this brief reflection paper, I revisit my experiences and how they shape my present role.

My former place of work is a regional university in the Pacific islands. My role was titled Student Learning Specialist – the term ‘specialist’ captured a level of sophistication and importance the university envisaged in learning support. When our team was initially bestowed with this label – I was somewhat overwhelmed as ‘specialist’ to me implied a highly skilled person who possesses in-depth knowledge in the area of expertise. At the time, I did not consider myself a specialist in view of the image I had conjured. The ‘specialist’ was required to work alongside specific discipline courses and nurture relevant academic skills in students. As I had been an English Language Skills tutor until then, I considered it was a matter of just shifting my extant skills to the new role which involved facilitating generic workshops and student consultations.

A few years onwards, I started with research studies exploring my role as a learning specialist in an L2 (second language) Anglophone English Medium Instruction (EMI) support structure. This led to an awareness of academic literacy(-ies) as a concept. Works by Ursula Wingate (2006; 2015), and Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998) not only informed my initial research but also the work I had been doing at the time as a specialist. I was literally discriminating between ‘standalone’ study skills and the varied levels of embedded academic literacies approaches (Jacobs, 2005; Wingate, 2006; 2015; 2018; 2019) I was reading about at the

time. This awareness led to exploring and understanding lecturers' perceptions about students' language proficiency and how varied collaborative academic literacy approaches between learning support and lecturers could address targeted literacies (Bassett, 2021; Macnaught et al., 2024; Singh, 2025).

The one point that I carried forth from this new awareness was that academic language is no one's mother tongue (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, cited in Wingate, 2015) and as such all students needed relevant transition to academic literacies. Lacking proficiency makes accessing and generating academic content difficult for students. The university I was at is an L2 Anglophone institution and the majority of its students do not speak English as their first language. They have had exposure to instruction in English quite early but there is much concern that students do not possess adequate language proficiency levels to access academic language and literacy (Singh, 2019; Willans, 2018). While lacking proficiency levels are part of many discussions, we do not flip this perspective to consider the challenges academic language and academic literacy pose, especially to L2 speakers of English. There is then a tendency to generate a blame discourse focusing on student shortcomings and ability for tertiary studies. This was 'the lightbulb moment' for me and it led to coming to terms with my own conditioning and uncritical acceptance of EMI in academic literacy. I started using this narrative to unpack the challenges of academic language learning. Meanwhile, my studies led me to larger understandings relating to EMI in the spaces student learning occupied and perhaps that academic literacies and language support were tied to specific contexts of learning (Murray, 2010; Piller & Bodis, 2022; Sultana, 2023; Taufe'ulungaki, 2003; Trent, 2017; Willans, 2022).

In the course of this 'awareness period', I changed jobs and moved across to Aotearoa, New Zealand. I joined another very remarkable Student Learning team. My experiences at my new place of work enhanced what I was familiar with. I reflect here particularly on my engagement with students both domestic and international who apologise for their self-perceived low/weak English language levels, that they are not L1 users of English, or that they lack expected academic English ability. In short, they perpetuate this rhetoric to rationalise their visit to Student Learning. It is almost to say that if this weakness was not present, they would not have come in. To address the issue, we at Student Learning use our orientation sessions to create awareness on the notion of academic literacy and that our services intend to facilitate transition

into its expectations. This knowledge I feel informs students that our role is not to fixate on or ‘fix’ their language issues but to prepare them for the language expectations of their tertiary journey. I think this knowledge is empowering.

As I now look back at my past and present job titles – learning specialist and learning developer respectively – I realise that learning support is at the heart of what we do regardless of the labels we carry. What matters to me personally is assessing what may seem like a challenge to students and transforming it into means that make academic learning accessible.

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