TOWARDS LEARNER AUTONOMY IN THE
TEACHING OF WRITING
A UWI STUDY

Valerie Youssef
and
Paula Morgan

This paper assesses the mounting of a tertiary level writing course, English for Academic Purposes, at the University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine via the use of a set of self-instructional printed materials, with reduced teacher-student contact. It indicates that the move to a learner-based approach was quite successful for the group of 48 mature students who took it, as assessed from the low drop-out rate, high success rate, and positive motivation expressed. Students were able to control their own time resources for assimilation of print materials and the meeting of coursework deadlines. The body of printed materials seems to have given them a sense of security which mitigated their concern as to increased responsibility for the learning process. All in all, the project bodes well for a shift across to meaningful learner-based education at the tertiary level throughout the Caribbean region, in order to more effectively reach those persons who are unable to physically meet the demands of face-to-face education.

In mid-1997, The University of the West Indies (UWI) stood poised to launch a degree by distance as part of a long-term thrust to becoming a dual mode institution. In this way, it hoped to meet many of the needs of the non-campus territories as well as those of the more remote reaches of its larger campus territories, like Jamaica, where many, at present, have little access to the University. In the Strategic Plan for Distance Education (1996) the mandate is summarized thus:

The University is becoming a dual-mode institution where distance education is tied closely to the existing faculties. The former UWIDITE system consisted of 23 sites in 14 countries. The expanded system will consist of 27 sites in 16 countries. The University has determined that it must increase its range of programme offerings and the number of enrollments to the order of 20000... up from the current level of 16000... up to 1000 students per year of this increase could be recruited through distance learning programmes. (p. 5)
In response to this mandate, a number of distance courses were prepared within UWI in the academic year 1996-7. A major issue was the extent to which the Caribbean learner, who has traditionally been attuned to a teacher-centred approach, would adapt to the learner-centred approach required for the distance thrust.

To address this issue in relation to English language learning, a distance course in *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)*, by Barbara Lalla, was offered, using an “integrated” delivery mode, to a group of 48 on-campus volunteers. This integrated mode offered a blend of open-learning and face-to-face teaching methodologies, with emphasis on learner-centredness.

*EAP* was designed so that:

1. It is broadly applicable to varied academic interests and varied backgrounds throughout the region;
2. It is self-contained, yet facilitates entry to English Language use for special purposes, such as the literary critique or the technical report;
3. It integrates attractively packaged information with tools for self-assessment. (Lalla, 1997, p. 3)

The study set out to assess the effectiveness of the language teaching material and the impact of a more learner-centred approach to English Language teaching in the context of tertiary education in the Caribbean.

**Background**

The course under discussion is one of the first distance packages for the Caribbean market that is little accustomed to the learner-based educational strategies that have taken over the USA, UK, and European systems. Admittedly, Caribbean students have traditionally studied for external degrees, particularly for the University of London, but the system has been mainly geared to materials prepared for rote memorization, with little attention to the student developing self-tutoring techniques through a range of practical exercises and activities. It was felt that the reception given to the course under discussion could be a potential guide to the receptivity and response to learner-centred tertiary level teaching in the Caribbean region.
EAP followed from a series of face-to-face courses within the University in the broad field of academic writing. Since 1990, students who do not possess Cambridge General Paper (AO Level) at grades A or B have been required to take an English Language Proficiency Test (ELP). Students who have failed this test have been streamed into a remedial English course—Fundamentals of Written English. Students passing the test would normally pass into a face-to-face course in EAP.

Though the University as a whole has been committed to raising the standard of written exposition and argument within the student body, individual faculties, namely Social Sciences and Engineering, have argued against their students’ need for the courses and have not participated in them. One result of this inequity, in terms of requirement, has been feelings of resentment and hostility within the remainder of the student body; these feelings have been exacerbated by individual lecturers across campus, who, for a variety of reasons, have opposed the programmes.

There is, generally, in Trinidad & Tobago society the perception that, as an English-speaking population, there is adequate mastery of English and, by extension, of writing skills. The relationship between Standard English and the English-based Creole, which is the native tongue of the majority of the population, is not fully understood and there is much interference from Creole to Standard, which goes unnoticed. In some cases, it is possible for students to function creditably within their disciplines and yet display poor language skills, and even fail the language courses repeatedly. The language courses have, in such a circumstance, come to be perceived as an unwelcome and unnecessary deterrent to success in acquiring a university degree.

**Theoretical Issues**

This study places the emphasis on the issue of learner-centredness because it strikes at the heart of concern for language teaching within the UWI framework, as well as the broader field of Distance Education.

Although distance education has been in existence for over a century, in UWI, as in many other traditional tertiary institutions, it tends to be greeted with a generalized mistrust. Many academic staff members hold to the school of thought that teaching is primarily a process of social interaction. Even among those who might deem distance education acceptable, there is a general assumption that it is second best to the face-to-face mode of instruction.
One of the questions underlying this study was whether there was even the possibility of delivering EAP by distance in such a manner as to yield comparable examination performance with the face-to-face system.

Keegan (1980), in a seminal paper in the field, defined the main elements of distance education as follows:

1. the separation of teacher and learner which distinguishes it from face to face lecturing;
2. the influence of an educational organization which distinguishes it from private study;
3. the use of technical media usually print, to unite the teacher and the learner and carry educational content;
4. the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue;
5. the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes. (p. 30)

A major source of reservation in relation to distance courses is the separation of learner from teacher so that teaching, which previously went on in the presence of the learner, is now to be facilitated largely by the print or electronic media, in the absence of physical interaction between parties to the teaching-learning exercise.

The course which is the object of this study cannot be termed a distance programme in keeping with the Keegan definition above. A more appropriate description can be derived from Jennings and Ottewill's (1996) definition of integrated learning:

Any form of student centred, independent, resource based learning which facilitates flexibility with respect to the timing, pace and place of learning and underpins face-to-face learning encounters between students and tutors.... Student centredness means that students take more responsibility for their own learning within a framework that takes full account of their needs and aspirations and that a significant proportion of their learning time is essentially self-managed.... Resource based reflects the fact that central to the integrated approach are learning resources incorporating a variety of paper based and/or electronic based media.... Timing, pace and place draws attention to various ways in which an integrated approach provides the student with a greater degree of flexibility to choose when and where to learn. Normally, of course there are
some constraints.... Learning encounters refers to any direct face to face contact between student and tutor in the form of lectures tutorials workshops, discussion groups, oral presentations, advice sessions, and so on.... (p. 14)

The replacement of the perceived ideal of increased face-to-face contact with an integrated mode of delivery constituted a radical departure, in terms of rationale and teaching strategy. In relation to the course content, the question arose of whether the textual information could effectively carry the burden of impartation. As a result, although primarily print-driven, the UWI course was designed to ultimately allow a measure of ongoing staff-student contact via teleconference facilities (approximately 4 contact hours per 3 credit course), and face-to-face contact with local tutors at remote sites (4-8 contact hours per 3 credit course). The initial study with 48 on-campus volunteers was designed to assess adaptation to the learner-centred mode, relying on the print materials to carry the major burden of instruction.

The fundamental shift from a philosophy of teaching to learning facilitation was a salient factor in mounting the course. The inclination to place greater emphasis on the students' desire to learn, assumed that learners were willing and able to acquire knowledge on their own account, and could be trusted to work through the learning activities, and to submit course assignments that could be assumed to be their own work. These concepts were at odds with the assumptions developed by the administrators of the face-to-face programme, who had encountered many instances of students seeking to create escape channels from what they perceived as an onerous course. Now, students were required to manage the learning process in terms of the place, time, and duration of interaction with the material and the pace at which they learnt; they were required to submit set assignments on time, without the prospect of negotiating for more time which face-to-face contact facilitates. There was the perceived risk that autonomy, in terms of managing the learning process, could work to the disadvantage of the students and, therefore, encourage a high drop-out rate.

Although there was clearly to be less individual attention in the new mode, the integrated course attracted a relatively high proportion of those individuals who had failed the language courses once, apparently because of its novelty value and its not requiring students with harsh time constraints to get to class.
Methodology

Aim

Our aim was to assess student responsiveness, in terms of affective factors including attitude and motivation, to the delivery of an academic writing programme via the integrated mode, with the course content conveyed via print, supplemented by periodic face-to-face contact sessions for tutorials, discussions, advice, and feedback sessions. The assessment would highlight student responsiveness to a learner-centred approach involving:

- their use of newly developed self-instructional materials;
- self-pacing with instructor/tutor feedback.

The materials and mode of delivery came under scrutiny in order that adjustments might be made to the model before it was offered for full distance delivery.

Participants

The study group comprised 4 sub-groups of 12 students who volunteered to take the programme. The average age of the volunteers was 28.5 with 29 (60%) classified as mature students over the age of 25. A total of 21 (44%) students was taking an academic writing course for the first time and 27 (56%) were repeating the course, but in this new mode. The participants included 37 students from the Faculty of Humanities and Education and 11 from the Faculty of Agriculture and Natural Sciences, of which 36 were female and 12 male. All had satisfied the University's matriculation requirements and were in their first or second year of undergraduate study. A total of 25 (52%) students was in full-time employment as compared to 15 (31%) in a randomly selected face-to-face group. It appeared that the opportunity to work individually, at their own pace, appealed more to employed people.

The fact that a high percentage of repeaters would gravitate toward the distance course was predictable. Since writing courses are outside the discipline area of individual students, and since some students reach the academic writing course after a year or more in the remedial programme, an attitude of depressed resignation is generalized among students embarking on it in face-to-face mode. For
such students the opportunity to take a similar course by distance raised the possibility of:

∑ less "grind" in the classroom;
∑ ready access to a body of professionally-prepared material;
∑ a different (and perhaps easier) route to completion.

Conduct of the Course

Face-to-Face Contact

Students were to have an initial start-up meeting with the Course Coordinator, four face-to-face tutorials in the course of the semester with an experienced tutor, and access to private appointments with the tutor or coordinator, if necessary. The tutorial sessions would precede in-course tests and allow for face-to-face preparation for them. In addition, the provision of four tutorial sessions, intended to "unite the teacher and the learner," provided opportunity for two-way dialogue on the material and the learning process, and provided an integrated approach which has been well-supported by the literature (Jennings & Ottewill, 1996). The tutorial sessions also worked with student perceptions and expectations on an ongoing basis, encouraging them to work more independently than they had previously done and to develop more confidence in self-assessment; this was important to the success of the programme. Research has shown that academic self-concept is multi-faceted, varying with time and experience. Students need to know what is expected of them, both with regard to course content and to what kind of assessment will be employed. Additionally we need to assess students on an ongoing basis and to devise intervention strategies for those who may fail (Campbell-Gibson, 1996).

Any problems with the materials were dealt with in the face-to-face sessions. Many of the problems raised dealt with what was expected of the students in response to specific activities and exercises. The tutor paid attention to the following areas, which have been specified by students as significant to them (Stevenson, Sander, & Naylor, 1996):

1. definite aims and targets;
2. encouraging feedback on assignments;
3. exam preparation opportunities.
Learning Materials

These comprised the Course text itself: *English for Academic Purposes* by Barbara Lalla, a separate set of assignments and due dates, and, for support reading, access to an additional text: *Writing for Caribbean Students* by Hazel Simmons-McDonald, Linda Fields, and Peter Roberts.

**The text: English for Academic Purposes.**

The text comprises 10 sections. Part 1 is entitled *Academic Language and Academic Writing* and consists of 4 units:

- Writing versus Speech;
- Language Choice in the Caribbean;
- The Nature of Academic English;
- Summarizing.

Part 2, *The Essay* comprises 4 units:

- Prewriting;
- Writing;
- Reviewing, Revising, Redrafting;
- Editing.

Part 3 is entitled *Options in Academic Writing* and allows students to select two Units on *Critique! Writing* or two Units on *Technical Writing*:

- Critical Reading of Literary Writing;
- Writing the Critical Analysis.

Or:

- The Form and Nature of Technical Writing;
- Writing the Technical Report.

Each Unit is divided into a minimum of three and a maximum of six discrete "sessions" for individual study purposes. Within each of the sessions one finds clear explication of the topic, sometimes supported by diagrams, quotations, or cartoons. There are Activities to be undertaken by the students for self-study and Practice Exercises for which Answers are available in the *Student manual*. One session is
included as Appendix A (Unit 1, Session 3: What is So Different about Writing?) to exemplify for the reader the precise nature of the instruction. This Unit is selected because it contains examples of all the features described as constituting the content of the text. Of particular utility is the initial section of each session, which delineates very clearly the precise relevance of the topic to be covered for the student. This is important in a course which, in the face-to-face mode, has always been a low motivation “chore,” stigmatized by the attitudes of staff in other disciplines and past students who have failed the course, often repeatedly.

All in all, the material lent itself to the students becoming engaged in dialogue with the text. The material was strong in terms of the thoroughness of coverage of topic areas, presented in a style which was both clear and conversational; its self-assessment activities, inserted questions, and interactive style stimulated reader involvement from the outset. Additionally, the material created “thinking spaces” for the students which, if occupied, could stimulate higher order cognitive skills.

**Assessment of the Programme**

A decision was taken to monitor student response to the programme via a discrete number of research instruments:

1. **A pre-course questionnaire**, which collected basic biodata on the students and their previous academic writing course history, and asked their reason for taking the Pilot Course.

2. **A post-course questionnaire**, which assessed student engagement with the course text itself as well as the mode of delivery.

(A list of the questions in each questionnaire is given in Appendices B and C).

3. **A coursework essay on the topic Assess the Advantages and Disadvantages of the Writing Course you have been taking;**

13 students took this option;

4. **Oral commentary received from the students in the contact sessions.**
Results

Pre-Course Questionnaire

Over 90% of the students stated that they had been inadequately equipped for the writing demands of the tertiary level during their earlier education and were glad to have the opportunity to recoup at university level. However, 70% of students who had taken the face-to-face course and failed it, blamed the programme (predictably perhaps) rather than their own deficiencies for their failure.

Among students who blamed themselves rather than a course for past failures, there was positive support for the remedial programme as having taught both grammar and writing skills. Three students who had passed through the remedial programme commented on their poor language skills, while one commented on personal lack of discipline and poor reading habits, another on the inability to shift writing style, and yet another, who cited the problem of not having attended secondary school, commented on the new-found ability to recognize mistakes committed.

Students selected the distance programme for the following reasons:

Σ time constraints which militated against their attending face-to-face classes;

Σ the provision of informative and interesting material which allowed them to study at their own pace (two teachers commented on the utility of the materials to their own teaching situation, and two others commented on their good fortune in having acquired "materials for life", and, as word spread as to the usefulness of the material to teachers, two others, who were not even taking the course, approached the Course Coordinator concerning its availability);

Σ the opportunity to try something new and different;

Σ the opportunity to study alone and to develop and use self-discipline;

Σ opportunity to take an easy or less time-consuming option (students attested to having this illusion rapidly eliminated when they actually embarked on the programme!).
Post-Course Assessment

The 35 students who completed the post-course questionnaire all claimed to have benefitted from the programme. Comments fell into two categories: a) commentaries on the course content, and b) commentaries on the mode itself.

(a) Commentaries on the course material:

Σ Students, who specified how much of the text they used, claimed to have read between 66% and 75%; others said "most," except for 2 who specified 1/3. When giving reasons, they cited time constraints preventing them from reading more, and said that they read what they thought was necessary for completing the assignments. Only 4 students said that they read with a concern for their overall language proficiency.

Σ In commenting on the utility of the text, 5 students said that the materials were specific and helpful; 2 that the materials were simple and straightforward, and 2 that they provided the necessary information for completing the assignments. There was a range of other positive comments.

Σ Nine students cited The Essay as the most helpful Unit and 3 the Summary section; there were varied responses to the least helpful, but 50% of the students did not respond to this question.

Σ With regard to suggested changes to the text, 10 students said that answers should have been provided for the activities, and another 10 that there was too much reading (6) or too many activities (4). This was the only negative feedback received.

Σ Finally, 18 students said that the utility of the materials beyond the course was their tremendous value as a reference text.

Subsequent to this initial offering of the programme, the course writer modified the text in accordance with these comments.

(b) Commentaries on the mode:

Σ Only 2 students had prior experience with self-instructional materials and learner autonomy;

Σ Only 6 students said that the mode of delivery of the course gave them some difficulty; one cited the time factor and the others the need for assistance with the activities;
All the students claimed to have benefitted from the opportunity for self-pacing (7 students) and self-discipline (3 students). Only 1 student mentioned improvement in writing and better understanding of English.

Most students claimed that there was neither hindrance nor help in their background, but 2 mentioned the lack of a sound foundation and 1 no secondary schooling at all. One student commented on having been accustomed to more feedback.

The Coursework Essay and Oral Commentary
(Additional comments to those on the post-course assessment)

Materials

Students said that there was a “solid” body of material to digest, with an abundance of specific information at various levels, from basic writing techniques to sophisticated critical analysis skills;

Because the course included an option in Technical Report or Critical Analysis, a number of students commented on the utility of the programme to their specific discipline areas. In this connection, one student described the programme as “a breath of fresh air... (which) ... offers the hope of passing the course”;

Students made positive comments on the breadth of the package. The provision of detailed written material seemed to give students the confidence to cope with the challenge which they lacked in the face-to-face mode.

Mode

Students claimed that the mode allowed them to think things through without spoon-feeding them, thus it increased their self-esteem. They were provided with the means to come up with their own answers independently and out of this “to feel good about themselves”;

Students claimed that they could “create their own space and work at it,” that is, that they could work at their own pace, and organize and manage their own time. There was an increased sense of responsibility and efficiency inculcated through working through tasks and assignments alone; the need for self-discipline increased the moral responsibility of the student while simultaneously providing academic development.
Students claimed that the course provided the potential for working through systematically and learning from one's own mistakes. The sequential ordering of materials facilitated understanding and their own control of the task at hand.

**Success Rate and Drop-Out Rate**

There was a low drop out rate from the programme with 45 (95%) students completing the course. Additionally there was a high success rate with 43 (90%) passing the course. In the face-to-face programme for the same semester the pass rate was 106/175 (65%). It is acknowledged that two of the four assignments were written out of class whereas in the face-to-face programme all were written in class. This may have affected the pass rate by giving students more time and access to resource materials, but the result is, nonetheless, encouraging.

It is important to note that the number of repeaters in the course did not account for the high success rate. The face-to-face course has a long history of repeated failure and ensuing de-motivation, with the result that a second round has traditionally given little guarantee of success. It seems, rather, that the opportunity to study in a different mode enhanced motivation for this study.

All in all, it appears that the provision of informative, interactive, sequenced reference material, activities, and assignments, with a minimum of face-to-face contact, gave students an increased sense of control over their own destinies, which worked positively for both their motivation and performance. Most significant are the references to increased self-esteem which the learner-centred approach developed, through allowing students to take charge of their own destinies in an area within which they had previously felt little control or confidence.

**Conclusions**

This project gives encouragement in nudging the Caribbean curriculum further towards learner-based instructional techniques. Since it attracted, in particular, those engaged in full-time work and more mature students, a positive route to tertiary level education is suggested for those persons whose other commitments have formerly excluded them from this kind of academic opportunity.

The low drop-out rate and high motivation are encouraging. A particular advantage of the course was the substantial body of meaningful instructional material which students could work through
at their own pace. The very provision of this material seemed to produce a confidence boost, and clear information as to what was expected added to this confidence level. Students appeared to have a clear perception of where their own responsibilities began and ended, and appreciated being provided with content material as opposed to having to make their own notes. This has been noted by the face-to-face administrators who have instituted use of the same body of materials for that mode.

Students appreciated working at their own pace and having responsibility for pacing themselves in the context of their own time frame. This is an encouraging feedback in view of the fact that the Caribbean region is sometimes regarded as relying too heavily on teacher-based instruction, which is perceived as destroying student initiative. It bodes well for extended use of such learner-based instructional modes throughout the region.

Undoubtedly, the course benefitted from having a mature set of students who, generally, show a more responsible work ethic than many of the younger students. All in all, however, the programme was sufficiently successful as to give encouragement in the thrust into the learner-based approach via the use of self-instructional and interactive teaching strategies. It suggests that the Caribbean region may expect success in equipping its population for this kind of meaningful change in the education sector, and also in seeing that the population adapt to a medium, which will better its development in the long term, by passing the responsibility for learning on to the student.

References


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APPENDIX A

Session 3

WHAT IS SO DIFFERENT ABOUT WRITING?

SELECTING WORDS

You may well ask, "If I can speak the language fluently, why must I learn more about writing?"

Written English conforms to more conventional patterns for combining words than does spoken English. This helps to avoid confusion. Changes in voice, like loudness, pauses, or changes of pitch, are important in speech. How does written English compensate for these sound effects?

ACTIVITY

The pairs of sentences that follow would sound different in spoken English. What are these differences, and how are they conveyed in writing?

1a The other revellers who were drunk gradually meandered home.

1b The other revellers, who were drunk, gradually meandered home.

2a The examiner thought he knew.

2b The examiner thought, "He knew!"

Is there a problem with sentence 2a? (CLUE: who is 'he'?)

Certain words that work perfectly well in speech are not appropriate in written English. Why is this so?
Here are some differences between spoken and written English

A speaker and hearer are usually together, even by phone. Often, writer and reader are not in the same place.

Spoken language is often informal. The distance between writer and reader prompts formal, rather than informal, communication.

A speaker usually knows who will hear his or her words, and is able to choose words that are appropriate for the audience. When you write, you may not know who will read your words, and your audience may find familiarity inappropriate.

Speech, once uttered, is gone forever. However, immediate interaction is possible. The hearer can ask for an explanation; the speaker can repeat important points.

A reader is free to review what has gone before. This means that the reader has less need of repetition, and may find it annoying, a sign of disorganization, or an insult to intelligence.

**ACTIVITY**

Make a list of vocabulary you might find in spoken English but not in written English. Now make a list of vocabulary you might find in written English but not in spoken English. Which list was harder to make? Why? In what ways may vocabulary differ between the spoken and the written language?

Written English must be clear to the reader who is not in a position to ask immediately for help. This does not mean that vocabulary must be simpler in writing. It does mean (1) that words must be accurate and precise and (2) that each word must have universal currency.

It is not enough for words to be understood only in a limited geographical area, or understood only by some limited sector of the society to which the writer belongs but to which the reader may not belong.

A term that is known only in Trinidad and not in Antigua is of no use to a broad Caribbean audience. Neither is a term that is used essentially in the United States and is not part of educated Caribbean usage. Similarly, competent writers in West Africa, Canada, and Nevis may wish to avoid language that cuts them off from an
international readership. We consider this aspect of vocabulary choice in Unit 2 of this course. For now, we will focus on the need for precision.

Because writing leaves little room for enquiry and explanation, it requires precision. If you refer to a weapon, the reader may well wonder, "what sort?" If you refer to a gun, you stand a better chance of conveying your meaning. If you refer to a Magnum, you may convey a yet sharper picture - depending on the age and culture of your audience. Good writing involves competent choice between range of levels from the general to the specific.

ZOOMING IN ON THE SPECIFIC

Clear writing also requires an ability to move between levels of abstraction. Often, you need to make abstract ideas concrete if readers who are unfamiliar with these ideas are to grasp them. In any case, a passage filled with abstract terms conveys a cloudier impression than one with concrete terms.

CLIMBING DOWN FROM CLOUDY ABSTRACTION
Expertise in ascending and descending this ladder of abstraction increases your ability to actually convey meaning.

An abstract or general term leaves more room for a variety of interpretations than a concrete or specific term. For example, if I say, "My pet escaped," what picture would you form?

Did you assume that I lost a dog? Many readers would. But what sort of dog did you imagine? Some readers might picture a German Shepherd, others a Pompelk, and still others a loving mongrel.

Your own experience or notion of pets would have determined the picture. How were you to know that I was lamenting the young alligator I had kept in a backyard tank?

Sometimes, you may choose from several words or phrases that refer to practically the same thing (deceased, dead, passed on, kicked the bucket), but some of these words may affect your listener negatively and some positively. Some words would be appropriate to a formal situation and others to an informal one. You need to be precise, not only about what you are referring to, the denotation of the word, but about the effect you would like to have on your audience, its connotation. Some words, like passed on, may have less painful connotations than others meaning the same thing, like death. That is, they are euphemisms. In writing, such words may be useful in some circumstances, such as a condolence card, but quite inappropriate in others, as on a death certificate.

In academic or professional writing, connotation is as important as denotation. It is not the concern of literary critics only.
1. Look at the following field of words associated with insanity. Identify situations in which each may or may not be appropriate.

- insane
- of unsound mind
- not in possession of one's faculties
- possessed
- demented
- unhinged
- bereft of reason
- non compos mentis
- mental
- barmy
- cuckoo
- gaga
- batty
- potty
- loony
- daft
- mad
- bananas
- bonkers
- crackers
- round the bend
- off one's chump
- nuts
- crazy
- schizophrenic
- psychotic
- neurotic
- unbalanced
- maladjusted

2. Now draw up a field of words for some term of your choice, for example, *food*.

3. Read the passage below, in which an environmentalist writes to stir concern for an endangered species (the iguana). What effects do the highlighted terms produce through their connotations?

It is one of the few indigenous members of the land fauna of the Caribbean, although the *gregarious* colonies which were part of the landscapes of the islands of St. Barthelemy, the Saints and the Tobago Keys have been totally *decimated*. This is a sad statement of fact, as until 1970 these colonies were virtually intact. With the advent of tourism, they were widely hunted and transported to the kitchens of grand hotels and restaurants of exotic foods, mouths taped, limbs bound, fresh and ready for the chef's will. In much the same way they are transported to Asia where they are prized aphrodisiacs: a *tortuous* and *humiliating* journey for the most *fantastic* reptile of the whole
Caribbean region....Eggs normally hatch after three months, and the young iguana breaks free to start life independently and unassisted. In these adolescent stages they may be the most brilliant saffron and emerald colours. Unsure of themselves, the youngsters will remain, hidden in leafy refuges for weeks on end....(Sutty 1993, 34-35)

Notice the following:

1. The writer refers to actual emotional reactions (a sad statement), and produces a touching image of helplessness and indignity.

2. The writer selects words with positive connotations to describe a subject not everyone would consider beautiful:

   fantastic, brilliant, saffron, emerald

3. The word independently; has a clear denotation relevant to the life cycle of iguanas, but it also has positive connotations.

4. The writer uses words like adolescent and youngsters that normally refer to human subjects.

You are more likely to select the precise and appropriate word if you expand your vocabulary. A thesaurus is very useful for this (if you do not own one, buy one at your local University centre).

Avoid treating near synonyms (words with similar meanings) as if they are interchangeable. There is a difference between similar and identical.

For example, look at the following:

   stupid, angry, furious, idiotic, mad, ignorant, insane, foolish, demented, uninformed

You could sort this into four sets:

   stupid    ignorant    angry    mad
   idiotic   uninformed  furious  insane
   foolish  

   

Eggs normally hatch after three months, and the young iguana breaks free to start life independently and unassisted. In these adolescent stages they may be the most brilliant saffron and emerald colours. Unsure of themselves, the youngsters will remain, hidden in leafy refuges for weeks on end....(Sutty 1993, 34-35)

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You are more likely to select the precise and appropriate word if you expand your vocabulary. A thesaurus is very useful for this (if you do not own one, buy one at your local University centre).

Avoid treating near synonyms (words with similar meanings) as if they are interchangeable. There is a difference between similar and identical.

For example, look at the following:

   stupid, angry, furious, idiotic, mad, ignorant, insane, foolish, demented, uninformed

You could sort this into four sets:

   stupid    ignorant    angry    mad
   idiotic   uninformed  furious  insane
   foolish  

   


However, these sets may overlap, as shown in the diagram below.

Note that *ignorant* does not overlap with *angry* in Standard English.

Consult your dictionary for guidance about differences in usage. Also, remember that, for developing a wide vocabulary, there is no substitute for reading.

In these course materials and in your text, you may encounter words you do not know. This is natural and helpful, for new words will expand your vocabulary—once you ensure that you consult your dictionary whenever you are uncertain.

**Practice Exercise 1.1**

The following exercises are not (and cannot be designed to magically provide you with) a wide vocabulary. **The best way to expand your vocabulary is to READ WIDELY.**

The exercises offer practice in using English vocabulary precisely. Try to do as many of them as your time allows. **Read each set of directions carefully.**

1. Arrange the following groups of words to show their levels of generality or specificity.
   a. trans-Atlantic jets, transportation, aircraft, the Concorde
   b. communication system, satellites, telecommunications, Soviet satellites, the Stationsat satellite first launched in the Soviet Union in 1975
2. Arrange the following groups of words into ladders of abstraction:
   a. dictator, human, Adolf Hitler, man
   b. theatre, entertainment, "Cats", western theatre, Broadway hits

3. The first set of questions that follow offer groups of words. Sort the words into smaller groups on the basis of shared meaning. As in the diagram on page 30, try to indicate overlapping meaning.
   a. cause, prevail, conduce, project, affect, influence, design, occasion, determine, predispose, predominate, prepare
   b. actual, material, intrinsic, physical, substantial, verifiable, real, concrete, true, tangible
   c. alleviate, bolster, uphold, lighten, obviate, prop, facilitate, support
   d. capricious, changeable, variable, fickle, alterable, temperamental, mutable, unsteady
   e. hasty, accelerated, impetuous, precipitate, headlong, precipitous, prompt, expeditious, impulsive
   f. strengthen, increase, vex, inflate, extend, intensify, aggravate, swell, annoy, add, magnify, dilate, multiply, augment

4. In the next set of questions, a word appears in capital letters, followed by a list of words or phrases. Select the numbered word or phrase that is most nearly opposite in meaning to the word in capitals.

   a. FALLACY
      i. unconfirmed theory
      ii. a sexual symbol
      iii. a valid argument
      iv. a tentative opinion

   d. FACTUAL
      i. fallacious
      ii. fictitious
      iii. romantic
      iv. visionary

   b. AMALGAMATE
      i. circulate
      ii. assimilate
      iii. reduce
      iv. disperse

   e. REFUTE
      i. disprove
      ii. allege
      iii. corroborate
      iv. vindicate
c. SKEPTICAL
   i. credulous
   ii. secure
   iii. confident
   iv. uncertain

f. DEERENCE
   i. aversion
   ii. similarity
   iii. promptness
   iv. contempt

5. Each of the next set of exercises shows a related pair of words, followed by four other pairs of words. Select the pair that expresses a relationship closest to that of the original pair:

a. EVANESCENT: DISAPPEAR
   i. onerous: struggle
   ii. feckless: succeed
   iii. illusory: exist
   iv. pliant: yield

c. MENACING: ATTITUDE
   i. threatening: danger
   ii. brandishing: weapon
   iii. arrogant: mien
   iv. overbearing: employer

b. MUTTER: INDISTINCT
   i. plead: obligatory
   ii. flatter: commendable
   iii. drone: monotonous
   iv. confirm: proven

d. DEVIATE: ROUTE
   i. digress: topic
   ii. veer: outward
   iii. derive: station
   iv. swerve: corner

6. In each of the sentences immediately below, one or more words are missing. Immediately following the sentences are words or pairs of words. Select the word or pair of words that best fills each sentence.

a. Because the results of the experiment were ... his colleagues gave them ...
   i. unconvincing ... credence
   ii. inconclusive ... little attention
   iii. indifferent ... thorough investigation
   iv. random ... objective consideration
b. Bronte reveals an ability to use plot, setting, and metaphor to ... the ... of the psyche.

i. compel ... criticism
ii. insinuate ... surfaces
iii. plumb ... depths
iv. ascend ... heights

c. Retinal ... leading to blindness in premature babies is believed by many to be ... to ultraviolet radiation.

i. reaction ... related
ii. disorder ... conducive
iii. ailment ... tied
iv. damage ... connecte

d. Why, it may be asked, until recently, did nearly all the most ... living naturalists and geologists ... the mutability of species?

i. immanent ... insist on
ii. eminent ... disbelieve in
iii. important ... testify to
iv. exalted ... deny
Appendix B

Pre-Course Questionnaire

1. Name

2. Faculty

3. Student ID No.

4. Age

5. Nationality

6. List previous English language Courses taken.

7. Do you think that the University should offer English Language courses?

8. Give reasons for your response.

9. Why did you decide to take this particular course?
Appendix C

Post Course Assessment

1. How much of the text have you read?

2. Why did you cover this proportion of the text?

3. What are your overall impressions of the usefulness of the text?

4. If you have taken both courses, which course has benefitted you most, UC10L (materials-based) or UC10E (face-to-face)?

5. If you have taken only UC10L how has it benefitted you?

6. Have there been any drawbacks?

7. Which unit of the text did you enjoy most?

8. Why?

9. Which unit was least helpful?

10. Why?

11. To what extent has the course met your expectations?

12. What suggestions would you make for altering the text?

13. What usefulness does the course material have beyond the course?

14. Was the course delivered appropriately?

15. If not, how could it be improved?

16. Is this your first exposure to a ‘distance’ mode of teaching?

17. Have you experienced any difficulties in learning through this mode? Have there been any benefits?

18. Is there anything in your educational background which has helped or hindered you in your progress in this mode?