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Teaching Academic Writing in Higher Education

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Abstract

Academic writing is one of the most complex tasks students encounter in university. Both domestic and international students struggle with academic writing; however, international students also face language barriers and are unfamiliar with western academic writing genres. Since many instructors don't know how to instruct academic writing as a process, the fields of Rhetorical Genre studies (RGS), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provide theoretical frameworks that can be applied pedagogically in order to teach academic writing effectively in any university classroom. This paper also contains a pedagogical method for applying these concepts into a writing classroom designed for ESL graduate students. It is a method that can be used in any writing program to teach both international and domestic students.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Teaching Writing, Rhetorical Genre Studies, English For Specific Purposes, Second Language Learners, ESL Students, International Students, Higher Education, Adult Learners

Adaptation to academic writing is a relatively understudied area. The majority of work tends to focus on American post-secondary students, and little has been done on the experience of international students as they try to enculturate to Western academic writing.

What the research tells us is that academic writing is difficult for both domestic and international students (Badenhorst, Moloney, Rosales, Dyer & Ru, 2015; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Bawarshi, 2016; Gonzales, 2015; Prior, 2006; Vygotsky, 1987). For international students, the difficulty is compounded by language barriers, and a lack of western genre knowledge and awareness (Bawarshi, 2016; Gonzales, 2015; Park, 2016; Singh, 2017; Shang-Butler, 2015).

So as educators in higher education (HE) that is increasingly being dominated by international students, what can we do about it? The following article is a literature review of research indicating the difficulty international and domestic students experience with academic writing, followed by theoretical solutions, and pedagogical applications.

The first section will focus on the problems that post-secondary students face when attempting to learn academic writing. The second section will look at Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) as a theory supporting post-

secondary writing (Artemeva, 2004; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010) and this includes English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Finally, I will conclude with a curriculum design for teaching writing based on the research.

The Problems

The famous educational theorist, Lev Vygotsky (1987) explained that writing is one of the most complex formats for humans to learn. He wrote, "Even the most minimal development of written speech requires a high degree of abstraction...the result is that psychological conditions characteristic of written speech are very different from those of oral speech" (p. 202). Similarly, Gonzales (2015) explains the difficulty students face navigating academic writing. She discovered in her research that both native speakers of English and second language speakers of English find academic writing to be a complex process. The difficulty students' encounter is getting the thoughts from their heads onto paper, and both groups described this as being a very linear process (p. 9). The international students, on the other hand, found expressing ideas to be different in their countries, and this adaptation to genre was most challenging (p.9). There is cognitive evidence indicating that language speakers think differently according to their language of origin. For example, Boroditsky, Fuhrman, & McCormick (2011) found that Mandarin speakers think about time vertically, while English speakers think about time horizontally, and this demonstrates how language shapes thought. If we fail to take into consideration the ways that other language speakers develop their ideas, then we are not giving them the best chance for success. Bawarshi (2016) explains that the problem with teaching genre as rule-bound, and fixed is that it has the potential to exclude. He writes, "We need to extend genre agency to include knowledge of strategic genre performances in space and time, within asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 246). In addition, Prior (2006) explains that writing is a social process. Using the sociocultural theory of writing as a lens, he examines the ways that writing creates systems of power. He writes, "Sociocultural theory argues for viewing writing as a mode of social action, not simply as a means of communication. Writing participates in making particular kinds of people, institutions and cultures, as well as indexing them" (p.58). Therefore, as both international students and domestic students learn more about academic writing, and how to write well, they gain access to these systems of power. The problem is that not many university instructors know how to teach writing.

According to Badenhorst et al. (2015), graduate student research writing is a "problem" that universities attempt to "fix" by putting the blame on individual students. Faculty departments assume that skills-based solutions such as "add-on writing courses, once-off thesis writing workshops, and the odd how-to programme" (p.2) will aid graduate students and counter their writing deficits. The authors feel that these skills-based solutions are inadequate. They write, "It is more difficult to get sustained, disciplinary-embedded writing pedagogies that allow graduate students to negotiate academic literacies over time" (p. 2). Badenhorst et al. (2015) explain that most instructors and supervisors do not know how to teach academic writing. They state, "Supervisors often do not know how to teach writing and they find it difficult to articulate many fluid discursive practices which remain hidden and tacit" (p. 3). So the authors identify three key areas students need to master in order to become fully competent researchers and writers. According to Badenhorst et al. (2015) successful researchers and writers graduate students need to "(1) become discourse analysts; (2) develop authorial voice and identity; and (3) acquire critical competence" (p.9-10). Their solution is teaching a writing course to emphasize these three important skills over an entire semester. The results indicate that international and domestic students become better writers as a result of their course. In terms of international students, Park, (2016); Singh, (2017); Shang-Butler, (2015) examine the difficulties these students in particular face.

In his interview of 70 ESL speakers at an English speaking university in Malaysia, Singh (2017) found that the graduate students experienced extreme difficulty navigating academic writing tasks. Based on the results of the interviews, he makes the following recommendations in order to support international student writing (p. 638):

- Designing writing programs
- The importance of constructive feedback from instructors
- Scaffolding assisted learning

- The need for lecturers to make clearer expectations, and to try to empathize with the challenges faced by the students

In addition, Park (2016) interviewed 35 international university students in the U.S. and found that although the majority of students felt that they had acclimatized to the host environment, adjusting to academic writing culture was most difficult. The conclusion indicates that confidence in English language ability also translates into academic writing confidence. Problems arise when there are: “mismatched expectations, (and) language barriers” (p. 900). Park suggests that researchers need to look more closely at how international graduate students “attempt to acquire English to be smoothly acculturated in the U.S. university” (p. 900).

Similarly, Shang-Butler (2015) found that mainland Chinese students experience great difficulty learning western academic writing. Her reason for the study is due to the fact that mainland China students have been underrepresented in previous studies even though their economic contribution to U.S. universities has been profound. In addition, she found that their cultural ways of writing differ greatly from American ones. Shang-Butler writes, “EAL users from different social, cultural, linguistic and socio economic backgrounds often find their ways of writing do not necessarily match the practices of the American academic culture” (p.7). She points out that rather than focusing on writing product, writing process is much more important to study in order to teach mainland Chinese students’ academic writing (p. 173). In sum, research shows that international students studying in western universities find academic writing to be the most difficult task they encounter in the enculturation process. Because acclimatizing to the social nature of academia is both a personal and social process, Rhetorical Genre Studies and English for Specific Purposes provide theoretical frameworks that can help instructors design writing programs for both domestic and international students.

Theoretical Frameworks

Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) explain in their book how to best apply the theory of Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) with pedagogy. RGS is a branch of composition studies that is grounded in the belief that writing is a social process. The social aspects of writing, known as the ‘social view’ (p. 5) dominated rhetorical studies in the 1980’s and were researched by Cooper (1989), Freedman & Medway (1994). In addition, the sociocultural aspect of writing can be defined as follows: “The central questions for research grounded in the social perspective are those that concern the contexts in which texts are created. This rhetorical context view emphasizes that awareness of audience and purpose influences both what and how a writer writes” (Artemeva, 2004, p.5). Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) dedicate chapters four and ten in their book about how best to teach writing to second language learners using RGS and ESP as theoretical frameworks. Chapter four is entitled “Genre in Linguistic Traditions: English for Specific Purposes,” and chapter eleven is, “Rhetorical Genre Studies: Approaches to Teaching Writing.” I will begin by describing chapter four.

Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) show how Swales’ book *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* helped to connect the ideas of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and genre analysis (p. 41). In addition, the change of study to ESP (that focused on genre analysis) from corpus linguistics, aided in bridging RGS and linguistics. Most importantly, ESP differs from systemic functional linguistics (SFL) in that ESP methods are used with more economically advanced populations who can afford to study in developed nations at the graduate level, while SFL is targeted at empowering those populations who lack access to education generally, and come from economically deprived countries, or neighbourhoods. Bawarshi and Reiff, quote Swales when explaining that both SFL and ESP aim to “demystify the kinds of writing that will enhance learners’ career opportunities and provide access to a greater range of life choices” (p.43). Furthermore, they indicate that Swales’ definition of “Discourse Communities” as “sociorhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals” (p. 44) helped elucidate the sociocultural implications of genre pedagogy. Most helpful is the inclusion of Vijay Bhatia’s “seven steps to analyzing genres” (p. 47) which are:

1. Situating the genre-text in its context
2. Survey existing research on the genre
3. Identify who uses the genre and who the audience is

4. Collect a “corpus” of the genre
5. Perform an institutional ethnography to find out who uses the genre, and how, and why
6. What are the linguistic features of the genre
7. Have a person who specializes in the genre format confirm the findings in steps 1-6.

In conclusion, this chapter is important not only in that it helps guide instructors in teaching international ESL students, but also for institutions reliant on international students to fund their programs who want to learn how to better teach writing to these students.

Next, I will assess chapter eleven. This chapter accomplishes several tasks (p. 189) such as:

- How to build genre awareness that can be used in a multitude of writing situations
- How to build a “critical awareness” of genre
- How to teach students to evolve from critique writing to other genres
- How to position genres according to their sociocultural uses.

Most importantly, Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) explain how to teach genre analysis using the RGS approach. They write,

In the RGS approach to teaching genre analysis, students learn how to recognize genres as rhetorical responses to and reflections of the situations in which they are used; furthermore, students learn how to use genre analysis to participate and intervene in situations they encounter (p. 192).

In summary, this chapter is very useful in how to instruct the teaching of genre in writing to international students. It is also very useful for those instructors who are not interested solely in the linguistic features of speech, but rather the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts from which writing genres have arisen, and continue to develop.

Implications for Teaching Writing in HE

As we continue to improve our writing programs in HE in order to support increasing international student populations, there are some steps that we can take to ensure that we are giving our students the best chance to succeed. As research shows, domestic students also find academic writing difficult, and require assistance.

Instructors wonder where to begin when they teach writing, and Harris (2006) explains that she begins her classes by teaching students how to write abstracts, and then moves into critiques. Although her reasoning for this scaffolding is subject specific, I believe that this allows students to differentiate between “Objective” and “Subjective” writing. If students are able to recognize that summary writing, and abstract writing are objective forms of writing requiring a close reading of the text, they can understand the moment when they are expected to give an opinion, and when they are not. For example, Shang-Butler (2015) explains that there are nine types of academic writing (p.6), which she takes from Hale et al. (1996):

- Essays (Subjective)
- Research papers (Objective and Subjective)
- Short tasks of less than half a page (Objective or Subjective)
- Reports or experiments (Objective)/observations with interpretation (Subjective)
- Summaries (Objective)
- Case studies (Subjective)
- Plans/proposals (Subjective)
- Documented computer programs (Objective)
- Book reviews (Subjective)

If we take these nine types of writing and add annotated bibliographies and literature reviews in order to accommodate graduate-level writing tasks, then we can see some themes emerging. About half of the tasks are

objective writing assignments, while the other half are subjective. By 'subjective,' it means that students are required to give their opinion on a topic. I find that most international students do not understand where, or when they should add their opinion, and so if I break it down into steps for them, it helps them learn. Also, students can't form an opinion until they have read, and fully understood the text. I teach Annotated Bibliographies as objective forms of writing, and students learn how to write Informative Abstracts as their bibliographic annotations. This helps them find the purpose, methods, results, conclusions, and implications for future research in each article they read. This teaches them to read for specific purposes, but also to write objectively about the research. Conversely, literature reviews are taught as subjective writing where students learn to critique each article, and assess its strengths and weaknesses. The literature review then becomes an essay that explores common themes in a series of articles that have been critiqued.

As a result of my experience scaffolding graduate writing tasks to international students, I created the "Graduate Cycle of Academic Writing" (Appendix 1) for teaching a Graduate Preparation ESL course designed for international students entering a Master's program (Appendix 1).

In addition I have come up with a step-by-step plan for teaching genre based on my own experience teaching international students, and taking into consideration the suggestions of Bawarshi (2016); Bawarshi and Reiff (2010); Harris (2006); Gonzales (2015); and Prior (2006):

1. Articulate the "WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, and HOW of the genre you are teaching.
2. Have former students who are now in their graduate programs, and professors from other disciplines come into the classroom to confirm genre-specific guidelines.
3. Provide clear assignment criteria in a hand-out or on an online learning platform that addresses word count, font size, line-spacing and assignment parameters. Provide a grading rubric at the same time.
4. Make available sample assignments, templates and language prompts specific to the genre. Incorporate a Citation style presentation early on in the semester.
5. Have students create group posters to affirm their learning of the genre.
6. Organize your classes to make time for weekly personal writing interviews with each student. Ask them if the writing assignment is similar in their country and if they have ever done it before.
7. Make a list for each student of repeated grammatical errors and host workshops based on those errors (For example, fragmented and run-on sentences).
8. Start with objective writing tasks (summaries) and move to subjective tasks (critique writing).
9. Reinforce writing tasks by having speaking presentations based on writing assignments. For example, in preparation for the literature review, which requires students to organize their annotated bibliography references into themes and critique them, I have students present on the themes in their annotated bibliography with a PP presentation. They are only allowed 3 words per slide in order to encourage a smooth explanation with a focus on speaking assessment.
10. Remember: We are not only teaching our students a new language. We are teaching them how to think in that language.

Conclusion

Research shows that both domestic and international students struggle with writing although international students are additionally burdened with language barriers and unfamiliarity with western writing genres (Badenhorst, Moloney, Rosales, Dyer & Ru, 2015; Bawarshi, 2016; Gonzales, 2015; Park, 2016; Singh, 2017; Shang-Butler, 2015). Although most academic writing assignments are the same as they used to be such as literature reviews and research proposals, academic writing is changing rapidly in an increasingly globalized world. This can be exemplified by newer assignments such as "Reflective Writing" and "Case Studies" that are showing up as composition assignments. In addition, populations are transforming as international, transnational, and techno-literate adults fill post-secondary classrooms. ESP can be used in combination with RGS for second language learners and native English speakers. These theoretical frameworks help to scaffold students to the social nature of writing by guiding them in how to respond purposefully to different audiences, and for different purposes. Students need to understand both objective and subjective writing tasks. By scaffolding writing assignments, making clear assignment criteria, and following the above steps, HE

instructors can help both international and domestic students better navigate the complex task of academic writing.

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Appendix 1: The Graduate Cycle of Writing