

ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) STUDENTS AS NEW MEMBERS OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: SOME THOUGHTS FOR LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

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This article reports on English second language (ESL) students' experiences of academic writing in a university setting. It draws on the notion of community of practice to explain that it is not sufficient for academic literacy courses to concern themselves only with the questions relating to the development of student academic literacy. Rather they should also be concerned with how students learn in social contexts and what knowledge is included and what knowledge is excluded. Such an orientation is vital because academic writing in the context of the university is more than just the ability to read and write, it is often the basis for the evaluation of students and, as such, becomes a powerful gatekeeper.

Keywords: ESL, community of practice, academic writing

INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that it is sufficient merely to tell students how to write and that learning to write at university is about acquiring and applying decontextualised and transferable skills (Rose, 1985; Cummins, 2003). Other researchers, however, recognise that academic literacy also involves consideration of issues of epistemology and what is deemed valid knowledge in the university context (Street, 1990; 1995; Lea, 2005). In addition, we now know that knowledge is individually and socially constructed in groups and that such constructions are by their nature social and subjective processes of negotiations that happen within what Lave and Wenger (1991: 5) refer to as 'communities of practice'. The idea is that in communities of practice there is a move away from the reification of knowledge and the teaching of skills and information to the negotiation of meaning among participants and a concern with how such meanings are contested ... or privileged (Lea, 2006:184)

In the current study of ESL students' experiences of academic writing in higher education we draw on the notion of communities of practice to explain how students learn to write in social contexts such as academia. It seems that notions such as communities of practice and writing as social practice are more important than what they learn (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Such theorising may have purchase wherever students encounter the challenges associated with academic literacy and where such literacy has become a powerful gatekeeper for exclusion. Lea (2005: 194) asserts that '... communities of practice ... can help us to understand the ways in which institutional practices, including textual practices, are integral to some students' marginalisation and exclusion from the central communities of practice in higher education'.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice refer to learning through engagement in a context that is defined by its specialist skills, discourses and cultural knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991:5). Within such communities, newcomers, such as students, learn to find their place, and are inducted into the practices of the communities by more experienced members, such as the lecturers. The core idea is that learning is a social process which is shaped by the participants in the context in which it occurs. This context is characterised by the interactions among the participants, the tools that they use to facilitate this learning and the activity itself – in this case academic writing and its associated discourse and genres. From this perspective, learners learn as they participate in the context – in this case the university – its values, rules, assumptions and history, and from the relationships between people. All of these interactions take place between peripheral participants (newcomers) and more experienced participants (experts). This context-based view of learning suggests that teaching ESL students to write is more than just teaching them the rules of writing and the technical knowledge associated with academic writing. Rather, it is about assisting these students to become part of, and active in, the different communities of practice in the learning process. Such a relationship forces academics to consider and engage with other ways of knowing, of learning and of writing. It is a relationship which allows ESL students to reshape and actively participate in the contexts in which they have to learn.

Wenger (1998: 77) posits that communities of practice are characterised by three dimensions which relate to the mutual engagement between learners and experts in a shared activity. This joint enterprise constitutes a ‘collective process of negotiations’ and a shared repertoire which includes the ‘ways of doing things and genres ... that the community has adopted ... and which have become part of its practice’ (Wenger, 1998:83). In the context of the current study, a situated approach assists in explaining not only the conditions for the learning that takes place, but also the practices that serve to marginalise and exclude ESL students from becoming full members of the communities of practice in higher education. Situated views of learning demonstrate how communities of practice enable a reconceptualisation of the role of ESL students in English speaking universities. In particular, it sees the teaching and learning of academic writing as more than just a technical skill that some students acquire and others fail to acquire. Rather, the teaching and learning of academic writing involves a process of participating in and interacting with several communities of practice within higher education, and the question that drives our analysis is not how ESL students learn, but rather how they learn in social contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to examine ESL students’ experiences of academic writing a ‘particularistic, descriptive and heuristic’ qualitative, case study approach was adopted (Merriam, 1998: 29). Such an approach examines a specific instance but illuminates a general problem, suggesting that many factors contribute to a problem or issue. The qualitative paradigm is characterised by an exploratory and descriptive focus that attempts to gain a deeper understanding of experience from the perspective of the participants in the study. Inquiries were made in the natural setting of the university, since the researchers were interested in understanding students’ experiences in context (Van Manen, 1990; Castle, 1996).

PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

This study made use of two samples, namely a sample of students and a sample of academics. In terms of the student sample, ESL volunteers, who were first time entrants to the University, without any previous experience of tertiary education, were invited to participate in the study. The volunteers were drawn from the undergraduate, first year Psychology classes in the second half of the academic year. By this time the students were already exposed to middle and higher order assignment questions. The former, based on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, consist of comprehension and application type questions, which require comprehension and an ability to apply existing knowledge to a new context and/or to demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between various ideas. Higher order questions consist of analysis, synthesis and evaluation questions, which demand that the learner go beyond what is known, to predicting events, creating or attaching value to ideas, and using creativity and skills to generate novel ideas (Bloom, 1956).

A total of thirty first-year students volunteered to participate in the research. Twenty-four of the thirty students were female and six were male. All of the participants were born and schooled in South Africa. Their home languages were one or two of the nine indigenous African languages that make up the eleven official languages of South Africa, making English a second or third language for all participants.

The students were arranged into seven focus groups, based on the times that they were available to meet. The focus groups comprised a maximum of five students and a minimum of three. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used to explore the students' writing experiences.

Communicative validity was established through a process of triangulation, where the different perspectives on academic writing were 'pitted against one another in order to cross-check data and interpretation' (Guba & Lincoln, 1983: 327). This was achieved by arranging a third round of interviews with the original sample of ESL student volunteers after the data had been analysed. The students were requested to evaluate and verify the initial findings of the research.

In terms of the academics, semi-structured individual interviews were requested from all willing members of staff, including lecturers and tutors, who were involved in teaching the first year Psychology programme. The aim was to investigate the academics' expectations of students' academic writing in Psychology. Six academics agreed to participate, two of whom were lecturers in the Psychology department, while the remainder were tutors. The individual interviews with the academics were based on semi-structured open-ended questions which were derived from themes garnered from the literature.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The data were analysed by means of a thematic content analysis, using the approach described by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998). This resulted in the identification of overarching themes, patterns and relationships in the narratives of the students and academics. The themes were largely predetermined by the interview schedule and were analysed by means of the following steps detailed by Lieblich *et al.* (1998).

- 1) Selection of the subtext: Relevant texts or parts of the narrative from the interviews and focus groups were selected for each of the questions asked, and used to create new subtexts or files. This was done separately for the ESL students and the academics.
- 2) Definition of the content categories: The categories were predefined by the theories and practice of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Street (1995). However, all predefined categories were read openly to allow for the definition of further content categories, or themes. The researchers were aware that the material was also influenced by their own theoretical and/or commonsense assumptions.
- 3) Sorting materials into the categories: Sentences or quotations were allocated to categories/themes, which included relevant material either from the same narrative or across several narratives.
- 4) Drawing conclusions from the results: The sections of text were processed descriptively, to generate a coherent representation of the content.

The following themes emerged from the analysis: expectations of academics, integrating competing discourses, essay feedback, issues of translation, confidence and self-esteem. Each of these is discussed below.

EXPECTATIONS OF ACADEMICS

The academics in the study seemed to think that teaching students to write was a skill and once students knew the rules for writing they would know how to produce good academic essays:

We make our expectations clear in the first two lectures and tutorials on essay writing in Psychology. That's where we orientate them into the structural requirements of first year essays. So they get a lot of lessons on essay writing in Psychology. Our guideline to essay writing is about ten pages, but I don't know if students actually read it (Extract from interview with academic, 18 October, 2004).

Catt and Gregory (2006: 24), in their study on academic writing, found that students find departmental handbooks of criteria and rules for writing of little value, since such booklets offer 'success markers' which are remote from the task at hand. While Hansman (2001: 44), from her experience of teaching academic writing, explains that the 'authentic learning about teaching writing consisted of more than lectures about assignments ... it was in the unplanned intersection of people, culture, tools and context'. This reinforces the notion that teaching to write is not only about teaching the rules, but also about including the student in the community of practice by engaging them with the assumptions and practices associated with academic writing, which is only one aspect of the broader induction into academic life. This absence of inclusion in the community of practice is evident in the words of one of the academics interviewed in the current study:

Use of correct language and basic grammar...these are basic structural expectations that for me are really important. In terms of content, we expect them to do their homework, do the research, give their own interpretations...you

always have that division between structure and content (Extract from interview with academic, 18 October, 2004).

With regard to academics' expectations of academic writing, the ESL students in the study expressed uncertainty about what is expected of them, stating that sometimes they do not understand exactly what academics require from them. Several ESL students attributed this uncertainty to differing expectations from lecturers:

I don't know ... you look at different lecturers and it seems as if different lecturers want different ways of writing and it feels as if you can't always meet what that particular lecturer wants (Extract from student focus groups, 15 October, 2004).

This finding is in keeping with Lea and Street's (1998: 158; 1999: 7) contention that conflict and miscommunication around academic writing often occur between students and academics when the emphasis is only on teaching the skill and content, with little attention to the context and interaction between participants.

INTEGRATING COMPETING DISCOURSES

ESL students in the current study indicated the importance of understanding the topic in order to be certain of the content to be integrated in their written response, but they found that often they seem to go amiss when interpreting the topic itself. Despite such misinterpretation and uncertainty concerning the topic, these students show the ability to integrate material when they are able to select information from texts, interpret it and formulate arguments. An inability to integrate content appears to indicate a surface approach to teaching where students comprehend the basic meaning of concepts without being able to synthesise different material to form an argument. Ramsden's (2003) work on teaching and learning in higher education suggests that good teaching develops deep approaches to learning.

I think their biggest problem is integrating information from different sources. In the body, they give a paragraph about this and a paragraph about that, without any link between them, because they haven't understood how to. I encourage students to take the information and give it back to me when they have understood it and are able to put it into their own words. I say to them, 'Make it your own words and then make it a concept which is your own'. It seems to me they take a piece of writing to answer a specific part of the question. Then the next paragraph will answer another part of the question from another reading (Extract from interview with academic, 15 October, 2004).

In this extract, social context, it is also evident that the more experienced participant (academic) is attempting to induct the peripheral participant (student) into academic writing practice by empowering the student with an important academic writing tool, that of 'integration'. Such like interaction between academic and student ensures that the student obtains the necessary tools used to facilitate his/her academic writing and concomitant inclusion into the academic community of practice. However, the process fails where the meaning and demonstration of the concept of integration is not clear to the student.

ESSAY FEEDBACK

Students experienced essay feedback to be a contradictory experience. While essay feedback was meant to assist them to improve their writing, several students were not sure how to correct errors of logic and coherence pointed out in their essays. When asked to provide 'further clarity', they did not know how to explain themselves more coherently:

Comments have to be clear because a person just says 'you are unclear', but really explain how was I unclear? (Extract from student focus group, 23 September, 2004).

This finding confirms that of Jones, Turner and Street (1999: 129) who reasoned that comments such as 'you do not focus your ideas clearly enough', 'pay more attention to structure', and 'this is illogical', underspecify what is actually expected in student academic writing. Injunctions to tighten the structure or express the argument more clearly and coherently are often a source of confusion to ESL students, who believe they have expressed themselves as articulately as they could. This points to a need not only for academics to provide more detailed and specific directions about how students can improve their academic writing, but also about inducting them into the rituals and practices of higher education.

As with the academic who attempted to engage the student into academic writing practice via the tool of integration, here again, it is apparent that essay writing feedback given by academics, which focuses the student attention on his/her errors, does not address how the errors may be corrected. A more appropriate approach would not only involve teaching ESL students the rules of writing, but also allow them to become active members of the academic community of practice.

TRANSLATION FROM FIRST TO SECOND LANGUAGE

Many ESL students seem to be 'lost in translation'. The students in this study frequently reported that it is difficult to express themselves when they have to translate ideas from their mother tongue into English:

When you have to translate your thinking into English, you are not able to express your feelings in the same way that you are able to in your own language (Extract from student focus group, 23 September, 2004).

They also mentioned that they struggle to find the appropriate vocabulary in English. One of the reasons for this is that there are words in the vernacular for which there is no explanation in English. They also pointed out that they have difficulties when the task words are used that require different action in English, but are synonymous in their mother tongue:

There are some words in English that mean the same thing to us, for example, if you tell me 'explain what Psychology means' and 'describe what Psychology means' I'll give you the same answer because in my language 'explain and describe' mean the same thing (Extracts from student focus group, 23 September, 2004).

This finding corroborates Mascher's (1991: 2) claim that in the South African context, the second language is a language non-cognate to the ESL learner's first language. This means that often first and second languages for the ESL student are historically and culturally different, with dissimilar grammar and vocabulary usage. ESL students may be faced with the dual task of both learning through the medium of the non-cognate language and learning the non-cognate language itself. As a result, these students become confused about the meaning of an idea in the second language when they translate it into their mother tongue. In order to become familiar with the vocabulary and grammar of the non-cognate language, ESL students will have to read more, in both languages, as writing is closely associated with reading. According to Cummins (2004), conceptual language developed in one language helps to make input in the other language comprehensible. For example, if students already understand the concept of 'justice' or 'honesty' in their first language, it would just be necessary to acquire the label for these terms in English. The task is far more difficult, however. If both the label and the concept has to be acquired in the second language, as is often the case for ESL university students, and particularly the case in the discipline of Psychology, where many concepts, for example 'ego', 'executive functioning' or 'cognitive dissonance' do not exist in the student's first language.

CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Confidence and self-esteem emerged as important psychological factors impacting on students' academic writing. The ESL students in the current study generally found it difficult to share their writing experiences, tended to be overly critical of themselves and their academic writing, and often under-estimated their writing capabilities. Bouwer (in Eloff & Ebersohn, 2004: 23) argues that an inadequate culture of literacy and/or learning in the home, frequently associated with a socio-economically disadvantaged environment, may lower confidence in one's writing ability and overall communicative development. The stress of generating and communicating knowledge and experiences in print, and the embarrassment and fear of being evaluated on the written product, often impacts negatively on the quality of academic writing, as seen in the words of one student:

I have this notion that I don't know ... I'm not good in English. But most of the things are being done in English. So I don't know? That notion of not being good is already there even if I know I can improve (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

This finding confirms Moore's (1996) claims that ESL students in South Africa bring with them a history of educational deprivation that continues to result in educational under-preparedness and exclusion. Related to this is the lack of necessary confidence and self-esteem that learners need in order to attain academic success. It seems that many of the ESL learners in this study did not feel that they entered the higher educational setting on the same footing as their English first language peers. Consequently, they did not feel that their home languages, their environments, and their customs were as important as having a good command of English for academic purposes. To a great extent, ESL students appear to be working in a subtractive bilingual environment and this impacts on their self esteem and self worth.

Willingness to view ESL students' home language and culture as an important resource is an opportunity to enhance a democratic South African society. By learning from the diverse

linguistic and cultural traditions ESL students present, substantial opportunities are created to develop socially competent communities responsive to issues of social justice. However, this requires an epistemological shift since academics would need to question whose knowledge is included and whose is excluded. Such an epistemological shift also raises issues of power and powerlessness in academic writing. It suggests that academic writing is not only about rules and genres of writing, but also concerns gate keeping that allows some in and excludes many.

CONCLUSION

This paper reflected on the academic writing experiences of a group of ESL students at a South African university. The experiences of thirty first-year students in an undergraduate programme suggest that learning to write academically is closely tied to an understanding of students' need to participate and interact with peers and teachers in ways that are shared and mutually beneficial. If the teaching and learning of academic writing is seen merely as the acquisition of skills, and the importance of a relationship that deepens student learning in social context is not recognised, then the demands of academic writing and the way it is taught will continue to be powerful mechanisms for excluding students from success in higher education.

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