The Creation of a Transitional Discourse Community to Enhance Academic Writing in a Resource-Poor Environment

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Abstract

The difficulties students face when writing academically in an L2 have been widely acknowledged (Dudley-Evans 2002 *et al.,* Paltridge 2001 and Swales 1990). While many higher education institutions in English-speaking countries have started to offer modules that support non-native (and native) students in their academic writing, very little is being done in this respect in developing countries, for example in Latin America (Carlino 2007 and Vargas 2007). In this paper, a project will be presented that aimed at fostering academic literacy in an M.A. course on research methods in a Mexican public university. Different pedagogic strategies, such as a needs analysis, explicit instruction on the target genre (the *literature review*), collaborative writing, a research journal, peer-reviews and group discussions were combined in order to achieve rapid improvement in this resource-poor environment. Through constant mutual feedback from, and communication with, peers, this transitional discourse community (Bruffee 1999) of twenty-four students moved towards the norms and conventions associated with the respective genre. The strategies employed might be of interest to instructors in academic writing who work under similar difficult conditions and/or time constraints.

Introduction: Difficulties Students Face when Learning how to Write Academically in a Foreign Language

English is without doubt the *lingua franca* for academic communication in the Western hemisphere. However, taking part in this 'conversation' requires, not only linguistic competencies, but also an understanding of conventions associated with particular types of texts. The term *genre* describes these standardized forms of language use and interaction that are employed, expected and authorized by particular social institutions and communities of practice (Bathia 2004: 186).

A number of investigations into cross-cultural differences between academic research articles (see e.g. Canagarajah 2002, Clyne 1987, Duszak 1997, Hyland 2009, Lillis and Curry 2006 and Ventola and Mauranen 1996) have pointed to the challenges non-native speakers in particular face when they learn how to write academically in a foreign language. According to these studies, problematic interferences from the L1 can occur on the lexico-grammatical level (including, for example, redundancy and repetition, and misplacement of new information), the level of style (texts might for example appear as either too formal or too informal) and the textual and generic level (little or no paragraphing and textual organization, limited use of cohesive ties and argumentative strategies, lack of meta-discursive guidance, etc.). Knowledge of generic patterns can help to improve writing in natives and non-natives and instruction in academic writing has, for this and other reasons, thus been widely established in most English speaking countries with a large population of foreign students such as the UK, the U.S. and Australia.

In developing countries, however, such courses and modules are still scarce. In Latin America, for example, both English and Spanish language teaching at the tertiary level still mainly focuses on developing students' linguistic competence without addressing aspects of genre, register and text

organization. In addition to the lack of explicit instruction in the target genres, students at public universities in Mexico and other developing countries often study under difficult conditions and time constraints. They therefore need additional support and effective pedagogical interventions that enable them to detect, analyze and appropriate generic conventions and find their own voice.[1]

The present paper will describe a project that aimed at fostering the academic literacy of twenty-four students in an M.A. course on research methods in a Mexican public university, taking into consideration the specific constraints and problems students faced. In order to make efficient use of time, writing processes, reflection and dialogue were integrated into the seminar structure. Different pedagogic strategies, such as a needs analysis, explicit instruction on the target genre (the *literature review*), collaborative writing, a research journal, peer-reviews and group discussions were combined in order to achieve rapid improvement in this resource-poor environment. Particular emphasis was placed on collaborative learning through the use of a research journal with follow-up group discussions. While this strategy at first encountered resistance due to the rather traditional forms of teaching students had experienced throughout their schooling biography, the participants gradually began to see its benefits. This allowed the group to move towards the norms and conventions associated with the respective genre (the literature review) and the target community. The pedagogic strategies will be discussed in light of quotes from students' journal entries and the final course evaluation.[2]

The Context: An M.A. Seminar at a Public University in Mexico

Mexico, as with many other post-colonial and developing countries, suffers from a great divide between the social classes which is translated into, and gets reproduced by, the education system. In general, descendents of rich families either attend schools and universities abroad or private ones in Mexico, whereas students from a middle or lower socio-economic background go to public institutions with few chances of proceeding to the tertiary level. Public education often suffers from a lack of funding, overcrowded classes and semi- or under-professionalized teaching staff. As a consequence learning outcomes in general and the development of different forms of literacy in particular are relatively low.

Hernández Zamora (2004) points to the political function of the deficient education system as a social and intellectual confinement of marginalized people. This prevents them from finding their voice in a space beyond their private social circles and thereby cuts them off from access to legitimate and powerful literate institutions and practices. In the words of one of the M.A. students: '[…] we come from a restricted scholar system that did not allowed [sic] students to express opinions'.

The present paper introduces a project that aimed at integrating writing processes in an M.A. programme in English Language at a public university in Mexico. Twenty-four students, including nineteen female and five male subjects, attended a seminar entitled 'Investigation and Professional Development' in the second and last year of their degree program (autumn 2008). In this course, students had to identify and develop a research topic for their future M.A. thesis, understand the characteristics of different research methodologies and design, choose the appropriate methodological instruments to conduct their own investigation, write the respective literature review, and compile a teaching portfolio.

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[1] Although there is a strong relationship between a particular text being realized in a specific way, its communicative purpose and the situation it is produced in, the form-function correlation is not as straight forward as commonly portrayed. Generic integrity is rather contested and depends upon a variety of contextual factors. A genre approach to teaching should therefore not be overly prescriptive: it can provide models but has to allow a certain degree of disciplinary variation, hybridity and room for personal rhetorical strategies if students are supposed to develop their own 'voice' (Dudley-Evans 2008: 1, Mauranen 1993).

[2] Quotes have been extracted from students' research journals and their comments in the final course evaluation, after students had given their permission to reproduce sections of their texts. Any indication of the identity of individuals has been removed.

The amount of issues to be covered and work to be done obviously surpassed the amount of time available in this seminar: 48 contact hours for the entire semester. Time is a scarce resource in a developing country. Many of the 24 students have families and all of them self-financed their studies through their work as English teachers. They are generally employed on an hourly basis through short-term contracts which means hardly any job security, no health or social insurance, unemployment during terms breaks, and the necessity to work at different institutions at the same time.

The precarious socio-economic situation of students, and the fact that they had to attend to a variety of other issues apart from studying, affected their motivation for and commitment to the M.A. Even though the degree is regarded as an important asset in the daily struggle for jobs and income, students have to prioritize their tasks and decide whether to dedicate time to their family, to generating income, or to reading and writing. The needs analysis[3] conducted previous to the project revealed that the majority of students in the group usually wrote an essay in two days, two students even in one. Four students said they needed between three days and a week and five students claimed to work a whole month on it.[4] This is mirrored by the fact that most students[5] seldom consult academic articles which would model language constructions. In addition to the lack of time, there are also institutional constraints such as restricted access to literature (many students are not eligible for a library card and there is generally little access to online journals). However, on top of all these challenges, the lack of previous writing instruction in both their native language(s) *and* in English constitutes the greatest impediment to successful academic writing.

Outline of the Project, the Pedagogic Interventions, and Students' Feedback

The project started from the necessity of enabling students to write a literature review for their future M.A. thesis in English in the four months the course lasted. Time constraints were paramount since a wide variety of other topics (research methodologies, research design, teaching portfolio, etc.) also had to be covered in depth. In addition to this, most students worked parallel to their studies and had not learned to write academically either in their native language or in a foreign language.

A genre approach was adopted as 'a short-cut method of raising students' proficiency in a relatively limited period of time to the level required of them by their departments and supervisors' (Dudley-Evans 2008: 2). In order to enhance students' understanding of the characteristics of this sub-genre[6], models of well and badly written literature reviews were presented, analyzed and compared, before students were guided through their own writing of short passages. These texts were then exchanged and commented upon by other group members. Students thereby improved their texts through cycles of enhanced revision, shifting back and forth between writer and reader roles. The adoption of the reader perspective was employed to foster meta-linguistic awareness, reflexivity, distance from one's own text and the ability to distinguish between sound and fallacious forms of argumentation. In sum, *collaborative* as opposed to *solitary* writing was employed in order to develop discursive and generic competencies.

The general aim of the seminar was to create *affordances* through social interaction and scaffolding such as peer and instructor assistance, feedback and support. It is here where most challenges – but

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[3] The instrument is comprised of 20 questions including closed-ended items (based on a 5-point Likert scale) and multiple-choice items with an open section so that respondents can provide clarification or comments on the respective issue.

[4] This could also mean that these students *begin* to develop the essay a month before the deadline but do not continuously work on it.

[5] Two students said they never consult academic articles for this reason, seven do so seldom, five sometimes and four often.

[6] The literature review is a core part of an M.A. thesis in that it establishes the worthiness of the thesis through originality, analytical breadth and depth, and systematicity. It generally contains the justification of the investigation through a synthesis and critical discussion of the accumulated work of others (Hart 1998: 27). Key features of a successful literature review are hence *intertextuality*, *dialogicality* and *voice*.

also great opportunities – for learning were encountered, since traditional teaching methods in Mexico do not foster active, group and peer learning. Emphasis is instead put on memorization and rote learning, and relations between students and teachers are commonly characterized by authoritarianism, discipline and obedience. This has two effects. On one side, students demand explicit instruction and guidance from teachers:

- I am the kind of student that need [sic] to follow directions

- I would like to know like [sic] a very structured manner to do this [to formulate research questions] because I feel like lost at this precise moment.

- [My classmates and I] wish to have a straightforward set of procedures to follow without having to learn the technical language or 'jargon' associated with many of the traditional approaches.

- For me as a Mexican student was [sic] very difficult to understand and get used to a different way of learning. The way you teach is for autonomous students who do not need pressure to get projects ready. So, at the beginning I did not get the purpose of your teaching. Little by little I realized that you were not a careless teacher but it was me who was supposed to study by my self.

- I never imagine [sic] that a Doctor would be so nice and friendly. You were always ready to help us and to talk about anything.

Secondly, students initially only considered comments from the teacher as worthwhile and did not appreciate feedback from peers as valuable. In order to introduce students to collaborative learning, several strategies were put into place. Participants were asked to reflect upon their learning processes and their development as researchers in a research diary. They sent each entry of this 'non-invasive, non-threatening introspective' tool (Nunan 1992:118) electronically and on a weekly basis to the teacher who read, anonymized and summarized all twenty-four weekly journal sections for the next face-to-face session. The summary was structured according to emerging and recurrent topics and presented and shared with students in the forum. While the instructor initiated reflection about, and discussion of, the issues through questions, students usually started to react to their peers' concerns, ideas and comments very quickly. Through these discussions in class, students received feedback from their peers and the teacher on a number of issues. They shared reasons for choosing a specific object of research, for example:

- I wanted to carry out a research in the place I work […]

- I am really concerned about how students feel […]

- I want to help my students […]

- I want to do something fast […]

We could clarify questions collectively, for example:

- I would like to know what I am specifically looking for. Am I supposed to look for concepts? Am I supposed to look for whole books to do my literature review???

- I also learned that literature review is evaluating and classifying 'topics', but not 'authors'. This is relevant because although it may appear clear for some, it wasn't for me.

- One of my main conflicts now is to know if my topic is relevant to teaching. How can I know if it is worth investigating? I feel the topic is not defined clearly […]

- I guess I foresee the results of a work but I can't figure out how to achieve it […]

The conversation thus helped to express and explore problems with peers first, thereby lowering writing anxiety significantly. The sharing of emotions was also particularly important in this context:

- I had some difficulties in my life. I know this is not an excuse, but […]

- I am still worried about the time for the literature review. This situation makes me feel stressed and afraid. I have the feeling that I will not be able to finish on time. I really hope this change, but I do not. I will try to be positive.

- This week I have been following my timetable (hurray!!). I don't know but for me, it's important to mention it.

- There is an ocean of information and sometimes I think I do not know how to navigate without losing my track and a lot of time.

Students reported on their efforts and difficulties to concentrate and write; the way they searched for inspiration (e.g. through attending conferences); their ideas for improving their learning and writing processes, and if, and how, they changed habits and identified obstacles, as for instance in the following case where a student reported of her need to

- […] complement my income but I have just quit the X school, well!!! Yes I just quit this job because I realized that studying the MA program requires a lot of time for doing a good job, so I took the decision […]

Students reflected upon every issue twice, first intrapersonally in their research diaries and, subsequently, interpersonally in the seminar group. Through the exchange of ideas, concerns and emotions, they began to develop a sense of whether they were going in the right direction and where they were in the research process in relation to others. This way they were able to develop confidence in themselves and the research process:

- Things start getting better. Although I do not have a specific topic yet, I have read very interesting topics about […] and it has helped me a lot to see that this could be a researchable area to me.

- I have realized that it is difficult to find the appropriate references for a research project if the research question is not delimited. So, I started thinking again about the research questions and […]

- This last session I learned that a MA thesis is not exactly a contribution to the field, but a way to show that I know how to do research, this is relevant because even take some of the investigations I have read about, probably from X and do similar research in my own context.

Learning took place through talking and working together and the seminar group slowly developed their own dynamic, norms and forms of communication. For instance, they collaboratively re-negotiated their perspectives on what academic writing and research meant for them, what it required and what it implied. They expressed the internal conflicts that accompanied this learning process, discussed norms and conventions that convinced them and others they rejected. Above all, students had to socially justify their opinions and assumptions. They thus formed a 'transition discourse community' (Bruffee 1999) that moved steadily towards the conventions and practices of the target discourse community: academics. For this process to take place, it was essential 'to provide an arena for conversation and to sustain us while we learn the language, mores, and values of the community we are trying to join' (Bruffee 1999: 8).

This also included a reconfiguration of interpersonal relations. Although students initially had authoritative expectations towards students' and teachers' behavior due to their schooling biography, they soon began to appreciate collaboration and autonomous learning as expressed in the following comments:

- I have invited one of my classmates, who has also showed some interest in doing something similar to my project, to work with me.

- This class was very helpful since I talked to my classmates and they told me some things I had not thought about how to approach my topic. I think I also helped some of my classmates with their topics, well, I gave them some ideas.

- Working with my partners also helped me to write some research questions. I haven't written any before, so now I am happy because I got some.

In the evaluation at the end of the seminar, apart from the specific course content, students stated that they had learned to:

- […] be an independent learner. I really liked working with presentations[7] because I could focus on the terms or ideas I didn´t understand in that way I was able to take my own way of learning.

- […] construct ideas working with others.

- […] consider the idea of letting the students work by their own. (I am using some of your ideas in my classes).

Conclusions

In the present paper, I have outlined a pedagogic intervention that arose out of specific constraints and problems that students faced in a developing country. In order to make efficient use of time (a scarce resource for students who have to work for money in parallel with their M.A. studies) writing processes, reflection and dialogue were integrated into the seminar structure. Through the focus on processes instead of outcomes, the group was able to build a transition group that moved through social interaction, communication and mutual scaffolding, towards the norms and conventions associated with the respective genre (the literature review) and the target community. As a group, these students enhanced and accelerated their learning through collaboration and conversations, something they could not have achieved as individuals. In the final course evaluation they claimed to have learned:

- […] to read a lot.

- […] to write (I was unable to write a coherent piece of writing). Your concrete examples and the course on genre showed me that writing should be focus on what I want to transmit, the format, the audience and my personal style.

Some students mentioned the research journal in particular as a learning tool:

- One of these activities [I enjoyed a lot] was the research journal. It was difficult because I was not used to writing about what I was doing during the process of reading and writing for a research project. However, little by little it became a habit and it was not hard to write it.

- The writing practice through a research diary was just great for me to improve my writing skill.

In addition to this, the encouragement to talk and write about their ideas, thoughts and emotions helped students to find their own voice and take a stance towards other academic authors as instantiated in the following comment:

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[7] Students were asked to give a presentation about the particular methodology they planned to employ in their respective investigations.

• What did I learn? […] but there is something else than just knowledge and I would like to tell you what it is: I learned to be a critical reader and writer and it is for me more important than just knowledge. I mean, I can get knowledge by reading books, journals, etc, but where, how do we learn to be critical readers and writers?

This learning to be a critical reader and writer seems particularly important in a context where the majority of people are cut off from access to legitimate and powerful literate institutions and practices.

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