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CHAPTER 13

ACADEMIC WRITING IN AN ELF ENVIRONMENT: STANDARDIZATION, ACCOMMODATION—OR TRANSFORMATION?

Laura McCambridge

THE CONTEXT

Academic Literacies scholars in past years have identified and criticized two main approaches to academic writing. On the one hand, many instructors in UK higher education have been said to treat academic writing as an autonomous cognitive skill rather than a social practice. This, Theresa Lillis (2001, p. 58) argues, has led to an “institutional practice of mystery” where expectations for writing are vague, leaving “non-traditional” students who have not long been inducted into elite writing practices at a clear disadvantage. On the other hand, Academic Literacies has also criticized what is termed an “academic socialization approach” (Mary Lea & Brian Street, 1998, p. 158) in which students are explicitly taught or socialized into the dominant practices of an academic discourse community. This approach has been said to be overly prescriptive, uncritically reinforcing power relations and both oversimplifying and essentializing community norms. Having thus criticized both sides of this apparent dichotomy, Academic Literacies research is left with a clear practical dilemma: If an implicit approach is too vague and an explicit approach too prescriptive, what can teachers actually do? How can teachers help students understand and actively negotiate the writing expectations they face without prescribing an explicit, standard set of norms? In applying its theoretical perspective to pedagogical design and practice, academic literacies must find a third way.

In attempting to identify such a “third way,” this paper focuses on writing practices and experiences on an international master’s degree programme at a university in Finland. “International” programmes such as these, which are becoming increasingly common in Europe, expose the dilemma of vague versus prescriptive teaching yet more intensely. These programmes can often be described as “super-diverse” (see

Steven Vertovec, 2007); their temporary communities consist of highly mobile students with very varied linguistic, cultural and academic backgrounds, and they are often explicitly oriented towards a global scale of academia while still clearly situated in local institutional contexts. Moreover, the programmes typically use English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), i.e., removed from the local sociolinguistic traditions of English native speaking communities. The issue of whether and how to integrate students into a standard set of writing norms in English becomes even more complex in this context—the most obvious question being whose norms to consider the standard? In an ELF context, assuming that there is a set of normative standards that should be taught runs the risk not only of foreclosing students’ agency in their writing, but also of reinforcing a global academia in which perceived Anglophone-centre writing practices are idealized. On the other hand, if expectations for writing are left vague, students in this super-diverse setting may find themselves with an even more obscure mystery to solve than those studying in L1 Anglophone dominant contexts.

Tensions concerning the need for clearer, more explicit writing norms versus the need to accommodate diverse writing practices arose repeatedly during a longitudinal ethnographic investigation into this context. This paper will overview each of these two needs in turn, drawing from both teachers’ and students’ perspectives, before suggesting possible solutions in the conclusion. It suggests that the potential for a transformative approach in this context – for students and teachers – lies in moving away from “in English” as an authoritative rationale in EAP writing pedagogy, cultivating students’ agency in their writing choices, and encouraging critical negotiation of practices and expectations.

The master’s degree programme in question is located in a medium-sized university in Finland and is conducted entirely through English. Its subject is multidisciplinary, within the field of culture studies. The programme officially lasts two years, but students are able to complete their final research projects (i.e., the master’s thesis) part-time.

For this concise paper, the following data was used:

- Four sets of semi-structured interviews with three students over two years concerning six of their written assignments. See Table 13.1 (pseudonyms are used).
- Interviews with four teachers concerning their experiences with writing on the programme and their evaluation of these students’ texts. See Table 13.2 (pseudonyms are used).
- Teachers’ instructional materials for written assignments.
- Feedback sessions between Megan (one teacher participant) and the students.

The “writing norms” discussed in this paper include any practice or convention

that the participants refer to in regards to how a text should be written and what it should include. Isolating one particular type of norm—e.g., lexico-grammatical, discourse structure, topic, content, purpose, process—would have been unnecessarily limiting; these various levels are clearly intertwined and together contribute to the completion and evaluation of a text.

Table 13.1 Student participants

Mei	29-year-old female student from China, first language Chinese. Completed her BA in English Translation in China through Chinese and English.
Stephanie	26-year-old female student from Germany, first language German. Completed her BA in British and American Studies in Germany through English. Spent 6 months in Finland as an exchange student during her BA. Lived in Ireland for 2 years working as an au pair.
Kimiko	30-year-old female student from Japan/first language Japanese. Completed her BA in the United States through English. Studied photography for one year in Turkey through Turkish.

Table 13.2. Teacher participants

Antti	Male professor and head of the programme. From Finland, first language Finnish.
Mikko	Male lecturer on the programme. From Finland, first language Finnish.
Matti	Male professor from Finland, first language Finnish. Completed his PhD in the United States through English.
Anita	Female professor from Finland, first language Swedish.
Megan	Female lecturer for the university's language centre. From the United States, first language English. Language centres in Finnish universities provide compulsory and optional language courses for students, often divided according to discipline. Megan teaches a compulsory course on English academic writing/presenting for first year students on the programme.

THE NEED FOR EXPLICIT, STANDARD NORMS

From the teachers' perspectives, more standardized norms were needed due to the difficulties that students' diverse writing practices often created for evaluation. They explained that students' varied linguistic, cultural and academic backgrounds sometimes led to such differences in their texts that they were difficult to understand let alone evaluate. As Antti put it simply, "it is difficult to evaluate those texts

where you don't understand the meaning."

Interestingly, although students' texts tended to be different in terms of language use and rhetorical style, difficulty in understanding also resulted from differences in addressivity, i.e., assumptions concerning the imagined reader. Matti, for example, explained that he had to invite an Iranian student to discuss his essay as a result of such misunderstandings:

He came to me to talk about it because I couldn't make out what he was actually meaning so we had a long very interesting discussion his argument was kind of too compressed that was the problem because I don't know the background of Iranian religious history quite simply so it was very difficult for me but very interesting and important subject and the writer knows what he's writing you can kind of conclude it from the text.

Here, Matti acknowledges that the problem was due to the writer's expectations of the reader's knowledge; he assumed that he could address either an Iranian reader or a global reader aware of Iranian religious conflict in his text. In this case, Matti nevertheless allowed for negotiation of meaning, eventually giving the student a very good grade after all.

For the American English teacher, Megan, who was employed to teach the "conventions of research reporting and academic writing" (as stated in the course description), the diversity of students' texts and lack of standard norms was particularly problematic. The main pressure seemed to stem from the responsibility she felt to even out students' differences and bring them into conventional English academic writing practices, particularly perceived British or American practices. From the subject teachers' perspectives too, the responsibility seemed to fall to Megan as a native English-speaking language teacher to make the students' writing fit for an external reader, primarily in terms of grammar and vocabulary. Several teachers expressed a lack of authority as non-native speakers in focusing on students' English language uses themselves; Mikko put it rhetorically, "who am I to judge their language?"

This responsibility to an imagined external, implicitly native, reader was felt particularly in regards to the master's thesis. Individual course essays were viewed as *local*, for local teachers' eyes only and therefore subject to their flexible preferences. The thesis on the other hand was viewed as a *public* research document, as Antti put it, "a window into what is done on the programme," and therefore subject to strict English language norms.

From the students' perspective, the need for more explicit norms arose particularly during the first year of the programme. They all mentioned that the instructions for written assignments tended to be very general and flexible on many levels (e.g., topic, structure, register) and students were expected to be independent. Often at the end of courses, students were simply asked to write a paper on a topic of their choice

related to the course content. The students felt that they had no idea where to start with this freedom, especially since the subject areas were sometimes new and searching through source material was slow work in a second language. They appreciated when a teacher did give more specific instructions.

Students particularly expressed frustration at not understanding the content, structure and linguistic expectations for assignment types that were new to them, such as summaries, diaries and research proposals. For example, on one course the students were asked to write reflective summaries of a series of books. When asked how she found this assignment, Mei showed clear signs of confusion:

I think it's kind of I don't know it's quite like I said completely new for me so I'm just like trying I don't like I said I don't know what they want that's what I cannot give them I mean so I would just try to use what I can.

All of the students mentioned that they would search for example texts either online or from fellow students in order to “imitate” some of their features. They seemed to do this not only because the text structures were unfamiliar but also because of their heightened need as second language users to acquire more language in order to mimic the voice they are expected to adopt. However, further frustration was expressed with the difficulty of finding examples that were actually suitable models for the specific papers they were asked to write. Mei, for example, noticed the difficulty of trying to transfer what are assumed to be objective, universal genre norms into her own work, remarking “maybe what we find on the internet maybe belong to other countries you know maybe other areas so it's not maybe not what she expects.” Moreover, Stephanie mentioned that she found it difficult to tell from the examples she found which features would be considered strengths or flaws by evaluators. The implication here was that not only did these students crave examples, but they craved examples that were specific to the assignment given and explicitly deconstructed by the teacher.

THE NEED TO ACCOMMODATE DIVERSE PRACTICES

Despite these frustrations, a discourse of accepting or encouraging diversity and flexibility in writing expectations also arose over this two-year period. For example, just after expressing concerns regarding students' very varied written English, Miko nevertheless stated:

But the global markets that we are collecting our students culturally its richness we actually need to think positively about the people's academic backgrounds when we make a selection.

In defence of the freedom allowed in written assignments, teachers explained

that it was in order for students to pursue their own interests on the programme, especially in relation to the master's thesis. This was actually seen as a strategy for coping with students' diverse content knowledge in particular. If students could relate the course materials to their own interests and discover sources that would be useful for their theses, this could only be constructive.

Although the students struggled with this freedom at first, they eventually appreciated it during their second year. Stephanie, for example, had previously studied under strict requirements in Germany, where she took many obligatory courses on English writing in order to learn, in her words, "don't do this and don't do that and be aware." During her second year, she claimed that she had benefited from the more flexible system:

Stephanie: I think that the thing that helped me to improve a lot was that it's like free you can do whatever you want to so you can actually like write about those things you enjoy writing.

Laura: Is that what made you more ambitious?

Stephanie: Yeah I think I enjoy it much more it's well I actually enjoy writing nowadays and that's the biggest difference.

It seems that for Stephanie the freedom to choose the content and to some extent the style of her texts entailed a freedom to personalize her academic writing and integrate it into her identity. Mei reiterated this point almost exactly, explaining that in China she had to follow very detailed instructions, whereas on the programme she has much more freedom. Although it frightened her at first, she eventually began to enjoy finding ways to relate theory to her own interests. She too seemed to integrate this process of writing into her identity (and vice-versa):

Mei: Now if you give me any topic, give me certain time, I can write, somehow it helps you. I mean that's how the people who study culture and literature and everything see the world when they look carefully enough, they can see something behind.

Importantly, Mei feels she is beginning to "see the world" as a scholar and writer in her field. She contrasted this enthusiasm with her earlier experiences of simply trying to "deal with the teacher."

When Anita, one of the subject professors, was asked specifically whether she would like students to be taught a particular set of norms for writing their papers, she replied that definitely not. Referring mostly to text structure, but also touching on lexical norms, she explained, "it would be very boring if everyone wrote in a kind of strict what is for me an Anglo-American analytic ideal." Instead, Anita hoped that teaching on writing would make students aware of options, the underlying logic behind those options, and their underlying ideologies. She explained

that students should be made aware of how various practices might help them in writing, but should nevertheless be expected to make their own choices, using their own judgment.

It was also clear that applying a simplistic “one size fits all” set of writing norms within a clearly diverse sociolinguistic context would not necessarily address individual students’ writing difficulties. It was difficult for teachers to tell whether a feature of a student’s text they found “weak” was due to disciplinary background, home culture, language level, lack of effort or something else entirely. For example in giving feedback, the English teacher, Megan, tended to generalize a student’s writing issues as being due to clear-cut cultural or register differences in writing practice. In one instance, Mei began a paper by writing an introduction of nearly a page with long sentences and no paragraph divisions. In a feedback session with Megan, she was told that although in China long sentences and paragraphs may be acceptable, it “doesn’t work well in English.” Mei later told me that she was actually used in China to using shorter sentences and had been trying instead to lengthen her English sentences in order to seem less “childish” and to imitate what she thought was an English norm. In regards to the paragraph length, she explained:

Mei: I found some examples of research plan on the internet and they are doing this I know of course in the body of the essay you will separate, but I don’t know if you can do this in the introduction it’s not like it’s very long ... but of course you know when we were kids in primary school we always have this kind of exam about like doing the paragraph thing.

Laura: So you don’t think it’s true that in China they ...

Mei: No, no, no, no.

In exotifying and essentializing the student’s cultural background, the teacher positions herself as an ambassador of new cultural practices into which the student must be socialized. She thus misses an opportunity for more meaningful negotiation with the student over the logic behind her choices and her actual dilemmas in writing.

CONCLUSION

The frustrations expressed by students in this data over vague or confusing expectations for writing mirror observations in previous academic literacies research in the United Kingdom (see e.g., Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). On the other hand, the problems associated with prescribing standard norms are amplified in this super-diverse community. This paper set out to identify a third way to approach academic writing pedagogy. In my view, the data points to two themes that

might characterize this third way: namely, agency and negotiation.

Firstly, the students themselves found that the process of improving as writers was a process of acquiring agency in their writing choices and in turn forming identities as writers in their discipline. This agency and identity could be encouraged by an approach that helps students to connect writing practices to disciplinary purposes. Kate Chanock (2001, p. 8) put it well that the problem is not with having criteria, but rather with the only rationale behind the criteria being “because I say so.” I would add to this the rationale “in English, this is how we do it,” which is the equivalent in EFL teaching on writing. Teachers are often themselves unaware that conflicting practices exist which vary according to discipline, methodology, culture, text-type and so on. If the sole evaluation criterion for students’ writing is its ability to match one imagined Anglo-American set of norms, both the writing and its evaluation lose their pedagogical value. Instead, I would reiterate Anita’s suggestion that students (and teachers) become aware of various options in academic writing, their functions and underlying ideologies.

This approach to connecting form, function and ideology would in turn benefit from collaborative methods in writing pedagogy where emphasis is on negotiation and consciousness-raising rather than prescription. This would mean, for instance, including those examples/models/templates that students seem so much to crave and enabling them to become researchers of their discipline’s writing practices. Examples that are close to the text types students are actually expected to produce and close to what they can themselves achieve are particularly useful. Again, however, it is important that options are given. The danger in giving only one example which the teacher alone deconstructs as an ideal text is that the students’ aim will simply be to copy its features. Instead, various examples could be used in order to provoke negotiation in which both students and teacher can justify their preferences. Nigel Harwood and Gregory Hadley (2004, pp. 366-374) similarly argue for a “corpus-based critical pragmatic approach,” in which teachers and students investigate their discipline’s discourse norms using corpus data.

It is important to emphasize that accommodating diversity and promoting student agency does not mean *laissez-faire*. The point is not to leave students to struggle and then evaluate whether their work meets a particular teacher’s ideals. As Claudio Baraldi (2006, p. 60) puts it, “conflicts between cultural forms must be managed, not avoided.” One way to manage these conflicts might be found in the example of Matti’s experience with the Iranian student’s writing. In evaluating a text that he did not understand due to the student’s very different background, Matti was prepared to negotiate with the student and actually came to appreciate his perspective. If teachers allow students space to explain their choices and are even prepared to question their own assumptions, teacher-student interactions are more likely to become genuinely dialogic and transformative, and ultimately more constructive learning opportunities for students—and in fact for teachers themselves.

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