



Website context: Learning from internationalisation → Teaching Strategies

## Developing writing skills

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### Overview

This paper considers how students learn to write academically at university. Traditionally there have been three approaches: the writing 'skills' model; the socialisation approach; and the academic literacies model (Lea and Street, 1997<sup>i</sup>, in Lea and Street, 1998:2<sup>ii</sup>). In related work, Murray and Moore (2006:54-69<sup>iii</sup>) argue that disciplinarity, a central feature of academia, needs to be accessed by students who must distinguish between the different rhetorical components that separate one discipline from another, if they wish to make a meaningful contribution to any discipline. The key to doing so is to analyse the published writing associated with such areas which can reveal the unique features of a particular discipline. Clearly university academics have an important role in assisting students to access the academic literacies in which students seek to become expert.

**The writing 'skills' (deficit) model.** This model views the difficulties with student writing as a student centred problem, that is, that the locus of the problem lies with the student. If students become familiar and efficient in using the atomised skills of academic literacy, they will be successful in discipline writing skills. The approach is usually associated with a student 'support' approach, as opposed to a student 'development' approach. The advantage of this approach is that it offers practical help for generic writing skills. The problem with this approach is that it can be perceived as remedial, and therefore stigmatised. Consequently it offers itself as 'power neutral' and frequently becomes associated with problem students, who are usually second language international students. Major initiatives in this model have been around teaching English as a second language or generic "English Language for Academic Purposes" (EAP) courses, easing students into first language teaching contexts. While longitudinal studies (Spack: 1997:50<sup>iv</sup>) contend "that academic skills are not fixed, (and) that academic tasks can be understood only within specific context, (and) that all academic work is socially situated". Such studies make it apparent that add-on courses may not fully acculturate students to the writing traditions, or discipline-specific discourses owned by the discipline communities, despite the important contribution they do make.

**The socialisation, induction or acculturation (default) model.** This model encourages (or assumes) the view that students will absorb or acquire the required skills of their discipline by being immersed in its discourse. Its underlying philosophy is that of constructivism, and its underlying weakness is the homogenisation of academic culture within the university. Those who show signs of not 'integrating' or absorbing this culture are encouraged to generic writing skills (EAP) courses to fix their problems. The strength of the model is that it recognises the relationship between the learner and the academic in the acquisition of the appropriate skills, and it challenges the idea that writing development is an individual problem. Where it falls short however, is that the complexities of language and academic writing are not simply 'absorbed'.

**The academic literacies (or critical) model.** This model sees literacies as social practices and as such puts student writing in touch with issues as epistemology and

identity rather than issues of skill and socialisation. Meaning, in this model is contested and academic contexts are vested with discourse and power. Negotiating success in such environments for the student is about learning to switch practices according to whichever setting they are working in, and handling the identities that each setting evokes. This model identifies the strongly ideological framework in which academic writing convention and discourse play. Clearly it is the model which underpins the prominent notions of critical analysis considered fundamental to academic writing in UK institutions. An essential part of this model is understanding what it means to be academically literate and that meaning is contested between the different participants in the academic community: the institution, the academic and students. By understanding the different expectations of each participant, rather than simply imposing judgements about what good and poor writing is, this model aims to provide insight into failure, non-completion, exclusion, succession and progression of learners in the UK university. One final point to make is that the term 'academic literacies' has replaced the term 'academic literacy' which often has connotations of the surface issues of 'correct grammar' and adequate vocabulary. The concept of literacies is meant to convey a meaning of language differences relating to particular fields of study.

Lea (1998:2) argues that these models are not mutually exclusive and should not be viewed in linear time dimension, with one model superseding or replacing insights provided by the other. She sees each as successively encapsulating the other, and each having their uses.

**"Academic language... is no one's mother tongue" (Bourdieu et al (1994:8)).**

Academic writing is specialised, reflecting the uniqueness of disciplinarity. This is what is at the core of Bourdieu's quotation above, and academics clearly have an important role in helping learners to learn the specialism of their disciplines. Schmitt (2005, In Carroll and Ryan 2005: 66<sup>vi</sup>) suggests that creating spaces in which writing mismatches between student and instructor can be discussed and made explicit. Very often, such mismatches are related to the acquisition or not of the appropriate language which will be recognised as 'academic' by an authoritative individual representing a discipline group. Pawley and Syder (1983<sup>vii</sup>) suggest that fluency developed by native speakers derives from the appropriate use of a shared set of stock phrases which native speakers tacitly agree are appropriate.

**Stages in Writing Development:**

Learning to write academic language is therefore not about developing creative or idiosyncratic style but is rather about appropriating the conventionalised language distinctive of an established disciplinary group. According to some writers (Wilson 1997, Murray and Moore 2006) writing is often indicative of stages or levels reflecting a writer's experience level:

**Repetition:** usually includes copying from unacknowledged sources. Such writing is not confident of the subject area and there is no citation.

**Patching:** is copying, with joining phrases, from several sources. There is some general, non-specific citation acknowledgement.

**Plagiarising:** paraphrasing in which several sources, sections, paraphrases and own words are merged. All sources are in the reference list, but page citations are unspecified or unclear.

**Conventional academic writing:** ideas taken from multiple sources and repackaged to make a more or less original and relational type of synthesis. Quotes properly referenced, general sources acknowledged. This writing is more confident with the emerging 'voice' of the academic writer.

Assisting students to move along this continuum relates to the amount of practice student writers are given, the quality of feedback they are provided with, and their willingness to respond to feedback by redrafting and reworking their writing.

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<sup>i</sup> Lea, M. & Street, B. (1997) "Models of student writing in higher education" paper presented to Higher Education Funding Council for England, Social Anthropology Teaching and Learning Network workshop, "New forms of student writing", June 1997, University of Sussex. <[http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/staff\\_development/studwritinginhe.pdf](http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/staff_development/studwritinginhe.pdf)> Accessed: 29 October 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Lea, M. and Street, M. (1998) "Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach" in *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol 23 Issue 2 pp157 16p. <[http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/staff\\_development/studwritinginhe.pdf](http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/staff_development/studwritinginhe.pdf)> Accessed: 29 October 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> Murray, R. and Moore, S. (2006) *The Handbook of Academic Writing: A Fresh Approach*. McGraw Hill: Open University Press.

<sup>iv</sup> Spack, R. (1997) "The Acquisition of Academic Literacy in a Second Language" in *Written Communication*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 3-62. <<http://wcx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/14/1/3>> Accessed: 29 October 2007.

<sup>v</sup> Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.-C. (1994) Introduction: Language and the relationship to language in the teaching situation. In P. Bourdieu, J.-C. Passeron & M. de Saint Martin, *Academic discourse* (pp. 1-34). Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>vi</sup> Carroll, J. and Ryan, J. (2006) *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*. Tonbridge: Routledge.

<sup>vii</sup> Pawley, A., & Syder, F. (1983) Two puzzles for linguistic theory: nativelike selection and nativelike fluency. In Richards, J., & Schmidt, R. (Eds.), *Language and communication*. London: Longman.