English for Specific Purposes 41 (2016) 36–49

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

English for Specific Purposes

journal homepage: http://ees.elsevier.com/esp/default.asp

Graduate students' genre knowledge and perceived disciplinary practices: Creating a research space across disciplines

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 28 September 2015

Keywords:
Genre knowledge
Disciplinary discourse
Knowledge-making practices
Multilingual graduate students
Academic introductions

ABSTRACT

Disciplinary differences in academic writing have been addressed in applied linguistics from multiple perspectives. This article focuses on the rhetorical strategies used by multilingual graduate students from the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities to create a research space in academic introductions. Adopting an in-depth qualitative approach, we draw on three data sources: graduate learners' analyses of model texts, their reflections on their own writing strategies, and a textual analysis of their introductions, to better understand how genre knowledge is connected to perceived disciplinary practices. Our findings indicate that the students' formal and rhetorical knowledge of genre is linked to their perception of knowledge-making practices in their respective disciplines. We discuss pedagogical implications for EAP professionals working with students from different disciplines in multilingual contexts.

1. Introduction

Disciplinary differences and their impact on academic writing have been addressed in applied linguistics and educational research from multiple perspectives. Most of this research has focused on the writing produced by L1 writers and professional researchers working in universities located in English-speaking countries. For example, in the 1980s Becher conducted several ethnographic studies of academics working across different disciplines and showed how their knowledge-making practices influenced their disciplinary discourses (Becher, 1987, 1989; Becher & Trowler, 2001). Some years later, Bernstein (1999) classified academic disciplines and their discourses in relation to the type of knowledge structures they represent.

Becher's and Bernstein's ideas have been further developed in applied linguistics, in relation to disciplinary discourses and genres. In the field of English for Specific Purposes, Hyland's (2000) corpus study of research articles across disciplines referred to Becher and Trowler (2001) to account for the differences found in the lexis and syntactic forms. Hyland's studies (e.g. 2000, 2005) have described differences in the quantitative distributions of lexical items and structural elements from one discipline to another, supplementing the findings of corpus analysis with interviews with writers working in the examined disciplinary fields. Other studies of disciplinary discourses in ESP have been largely corpus-based and focused on specific genres and move structures (e.g. Huckin, 2001; Kuteeva & McGrath, 2015; Lin & Evans, 2012; Yang & Allison, 2004) or syntactic and lexical features (e.g. Hewings & Hewings, 2001; Hyland, 1999, 2008; McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012). At the same time,

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2015.08.004
0889-4906/

Systemic Functional Linguistics (e.g. Christie & Maton, 2011; Hood, 2011; Martin, 2011; Martin, Maton, & Matruglio, 2010) has been developing Bernstein's (1999) ideas of disciplinary knowledge structures in relation to the study of academic discourses. For example, Hood (2011) has shown how writers in different disciplines engage with knowers and knowledge in introductions to research articles. The above-mentioned research has offered some interesting insights into disciplinary differences in professional academic writing. Less attention has been paid to the impact of the discipline on L2 writing by graduate students (e.g. Hyland, 2004b). It is therefore worthwhile to conduct further research into students' genre knowledge in connection with disciplinary knowledge-making practices. In this article we focus on the rhetorical strategies used by graduate students from different disciplines to create a research space in academic introductions. Adopting an in-depth qualitative approach, we draw on three data sources: graduate learners' analyses of model texts, their reflections on their own writing strategies, and a textual analysis of their texts, to better understand how genre knowledge overlaps with the ability to construct knowledge for different communities of discourse (Tardy, 2009). We address the following research questions: How do graduate students from different disciplines use their genre knowledge to create a research space? How are their rhetorical and linguistic strategies connected to perceived disciplinary knowledge-making practices?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Knowledge-making practices

Each discipline has its own goals and assumptions as to what constitutes knowledge (ontology) and how this knowledge is obtained (epistemology). In this article, we broadly refer to these as knowledge-making practices, which reflect the nature of the discipline and what it means to construct knowledge. As outlined in Section 1, the significance of disciplinary differences has been a recurring theme in educational and linguistic research for over twenty years. Becher (1989) classified disciplines according to four major categories: 'pure hard', 'pure soft', 'applied hard' and 'applied soft', depending on their epistemological characteristics. This classification has been widely used in research on disciplinary discourses (e.g. Hyland, 2000, 2005). The link between epistemology and academic discourse has also been explored by Bernstein (1999). Bernstein (1999) explains disciplinary differences through epistemological factors in connection to different kinds of knowledge structures. At one end of the continuum lie *hierarchical* knowledge structures, which attempt 'to create very general propositions and theories, which integrate knowledge at lower levels' (Bernstein, 1999, p. 162) and are typical of the natural sciences, in which knowledge rests upon the same foundation and is accumulated through empirical enquiry. At the other end, there are *horizontal* knowledge structures, such as the humanities, in which knowledge is built through interpretation and through multiple interpretations of the same phenomena and artefacts. Wignell (2007) proposed a view of the social sciences as 'warring triangles', in the sense that these disciplines often model themselves on sciences but with different theoretical foundations; some theories may become dominant and marginalize others, but a single theory seldom takes over the whole discipline. For example, linguistics is seen as one such discipline (see Figure 1).

However, over the last decades, the boundaries between disciplines have become increasingly blurred. For example, theories from disciplines such as Sociology and Philosophy have been adapted to the study of literature. Trowler (2014) offers an excellent account of the "troubled" nature of disciplines in contemporary academia. He challenges the "hard" versus "soft" sciences dichotomy and argues that disciplines are context-dependent in different parts of the world. For example, the research and teaching of Sociology at a German university is not the same as the similar kinds of activities at an American university, although there will be resemblances between the two. Trowler's arguments are relevant to the teaching of academic writing in English, which should be viewed as context-situated. The following section will show how disciplinary differences are manifested in academic genres.

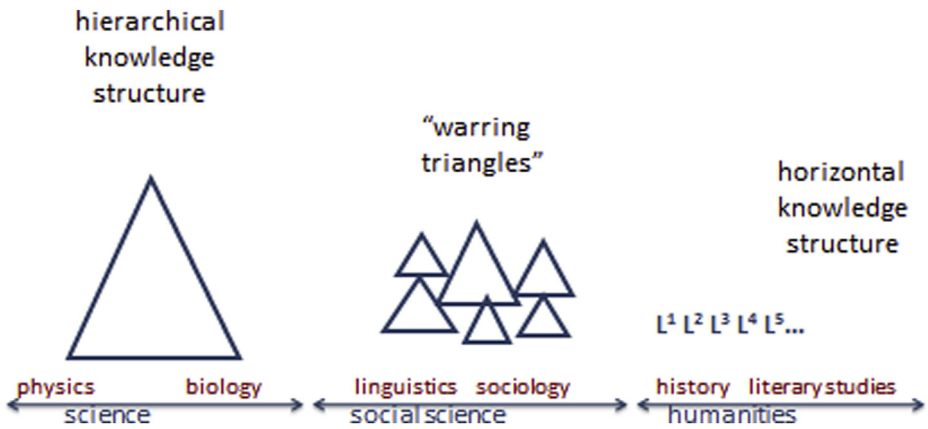

Figure 1. Knowledge structures across disciplines. Adapted from Martin (2011, pp. 42-43).