



Novice ESL writers: A longitudinal case-study of the situated academic writing processes of three undergraduates in a TESOL context



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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the situated academic writing processes of three ESL writers as they researched, planned, and wrote three modular assignments over the course of their first academic year on a UK university, undergraduate TESOL programme. Adopting a socio-cognitive perspective it focuses on the changing patterns of textual and interpersonal interactions that constituted the participants' processes. Data were collected over the year from day-by-day audio-recorded activity logs and interviews, triangulated with tutorial records and textual material of various kinds (chiefly, outlines, charts, drafts, electronic correspondence). Data were analysed using qualitative procedures to enable the construction of detailed narratives of developing academic writing processes. The study (a) affirms a view of academic writing as a complex socio-cognitive process implicating a range of textual and interpersonal interactions, and identifies two distinct approaches to the writing of academic texts, both of which may lead to high-quality writing and (b) finds that some novice writers engage in textual interactions which provide information about genre, rhetoric, language and the communities of practice within which they write and that this may be one factor distinguishing more from less successful academic writers.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores novice ESL academic writing processes, through a longitudinal case-study reporting the textual and interpersonal interactions of three Arabic-speaking undergraduates on an English-medium TESOL programme, as they completed three assessed assignments, over an academic year. As a study of the way ESL novice writers transform disciplinary knowledge through writing, it offers insights into two under-researched areas of concern to EAP practitioners: (1) the approaches novice writers develop towards completing academic assignments, and the patterns of textual and interpersonal interaction, that characterise these approaches; and (2) the connections between approach and quality of writing, particularly with regard to textual or interpersonal interactions that generate meta-knowledge relating to writing.

Since the 1990s, academic writing has been widely constructed, as both a socially situated practice (Clark and Ivanič, 1997; Ivanič, 1998; Leki, 2007; Lillis, 2001), shaped by disciplinary discourse communities (Beaufort, 2000; Swales, 1990; Woodward-Kron, 2004) or communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and from a socio-cognitive perspective (Atkinson, 2002; Gee, 1996), as a process in which writers, as cognizing individuals, interact in complex ways with their 'socially-constructed and mediated world[s]' (Atkinson, 2002: 531), in active participation in overarching 'Discourses' (Gee, 1996), in order both to write and to

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learn how to write. In this view, meaning resides both in the mind of the writer and in the social tools, products and practices present in the writer's world (Atkinson, 2002) and acts of communication and learning occur through interactions between the two. The socio-cognitive case-study literature implicates a wide range of textual and interpersonal interactions in writing and learning to write (Angelova and Riazantseva, 1999; Artemeva, 2008; Brandt, 1992; Freedman, 1987; Gentil, 2005; Riaz, 1997).

There are, however, gaps in the study of situated academic writing processes. Firstly, with regard to ESL undergraduates writing within disciplinary contexts, there has been little research into the ways patterns of textual or interpersonal interaction might form or characterise distinct *approaches* to the completion of academic assignments. There has been research into this in the UK with regard to L1 English speakers. For example, Torrance, Thomas, & Robinson (1994) identified three broad approaches in post-graduate writing, in which writers invested their primary efforts in (a) planning, (b) drafting or (c) both, more or less equally. Torrance, Thomas, & Robinson (2000), a large-scale, cross-sectional and longitudinal study identified four approaches: (a) 'detailed-planning', in which writers both outlined and used at least one additional technique such as brainstorming or mind-mapping before drafting once, or more commonly twice; (b) 'outline-and-develop', in which some pre-draft planning was undertaken but in which content was also developed during drafting; (c) 'minimal-drafting', in which writers wrote one or two drafts with little prior planning; and (d) 'think-then-do' which involved mental planning but not the production of a written outline. It would fill a research gap to investigate if novice ESL writers adopt such approaches, especially if an alternative, ethnographic approach could be used to complement the questionnaire approach of Torrance et al. (1994, 2000), and such an investigation would, in turn, make it possible to explore the connection between approaches to, and quality of, writing.

This connection between writing processes and quality of writing is the second point of interest. There are two issues here, reflecting the fact that as a practice, academic writing may be constructed at two levels: (a) the production of texts, and (b) the production of meta-knowledge about the production of texts. The first issue is whether or not particular, identifiable approaches to the production of texts, such as those identified by Torrance et al. (2000) correlate with higher-quality writing, as assessed by academic communities. The pedagogic literature on process writing (for example, Leki, 1998) generally emphasises the importance of extensive pre-draft planning, an emphasis supported by the literature on learning strategies for writing (Oxford, 1990) and much of the literature on novice-expert differences in writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Torrance et al. (2000) too found some evidence to support this (though they also found evidence, to support a 'think-then-do approach', not involving written planning). This consensus, however, begs the question as to why an approach to writing in which ideas are developed in detail prior to drafting should necessarily produce better quality writing than an approach in which some initial planning is followed by the recursive and developmental articulation of ideas.

The second issue concerns the function of writing practice in educating novice writers about writing. There is ample evidence to indicate that the process of writing helps novice writers transform their understanding of their subject matter, of disciplinary genres, and of their academic communities of practice (Freedman, 1987; Riaz, 1997). What is less evidenced is the way writers might pro-actively build into their processes textual or interpersonal interactions directed at learning about writing. This is a matter of particular concern when looking at the processes of novice ESL writers, as there may be particular patterns of interaction that would help novice writers maximise their experiential learning. There are clues to the kinds of interaction that might serve novice writers in this way, in the literature on genre-learning (surveyed in Tardy, 2006) and academic literacy acquisition (surveyed in Braine, 2002). Hirvela (2004) for example, highlights the way learner writers may deliberately seek out such information by 'mining' texts for genre, rhetorical or linguistic information, or develop a practice of 'writerly reading' with an eye for rhetorical choices. It would assist EAP practitioners and researchers to know if novice ESL writers engage in such interactions and if such practices support their learning.

Before proceeding to the study, one final issue needs to be introduced. The models of writing developed by Flower and Hayes over the 1980s (Flower, 1988; Flower & Hayes, 1980, 1981; Flower et al., 1990), construct writing as a problem-oriented process, central to which is the concept of a 'rhetorical problem', defined as the interaction between a writer and his/her communicative/rhetorical goals and the audience, task and topic (Flower & Hayes, 1980). This concept permits an investigation of processes to commence from what a writer is trying to achieve. In this paper the concept is recast as a 'cognitive-rhetorical problem' (CRP) to foreground the intertwining of declarative and procedural knowledge (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988) in academic writing. Further, any given academic writing task is conceived as posing a hierarchically organized set of CRPs, each of which both forms a component of a higher level CRP, and comprises a set of lower level CRPs. So, a superordinate CRP such as completing an essay will comprise subordinate CRPs to do with identifying and locating literature; constructing understandings through note-taking, commentary, synthesis and critique; developing an argument; and so on, extending downwards to localized levels, such as punctuation choice.

2. Research design

2.1. Context

The participants in this study were students on a BA degree programme in TESOL, designed and delivered by a UK university, for the Sultanate of Oman's Ministry of Education (see Atkins & Griffiths, 2009). The three-year programme, designed for serving primary and secondary school teachers of English, covered topics such as the teaching of English to young learners, the design of tasks and lessons and the teaching of initial literacy. Students studied in two modes: (a) intensive, 2–8 week blocks, in which teaching chiefly focused on modular concepts and (b) extensive, on weekly day-release from their schools as members of regional groups of 30–35 students, in which teaching chiefly focused on the application of course concepts to

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