



What our students tell us: Perceptions of three multilingual students on their academic writing in first year



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ABSTRACT

Over the last couple of decades, there has been a growing recognition of the complexity of academic writing, including an interest in how learners negotiate the contexts within which they learn to write. As teachers in an EAP program, we approached this study with an interest in how our multilingual students negotiate the demands of their written assignments within particular disciplinary communities. The focus of the paper is thus on students' perceptions of what it means to "do" academic writing in their first year at university. A case study approach revealed the diversity of student perceptions of academic writing (as an issue of "skills" development, interpersonal relations, or the negotiation of authorial identities), as well as the multiplicity of resources that the multilingual students had at their disposal. It also allowed for insights into unexpected practices contributing to the students' progress as academic writers. Our findings suggest that the social context relevant for student writing includes but extends beyond the formal and academic, and embraces spaces and practices outside the institution. The current study was conducted in an Australian university, and one of its purposes is to add an Australian perspective to the growing body of case study research in academic literacy.

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1. Introduction

Many scholars have documented the challenges of writing in the academy—challenges that are seen to be more pronounced for students whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds differ from those of the majority of students at the English-medium universities where they study. Over the last couple of decades, there has been a growing recognition of the complexity of academic writing, including an interest in issues related to learners and the contexts within which they learn to write. These developments in academic writing research need to be understood in a broader context, alongside changes in related areas of study. The field of Second Language Acquisition, for example, has seen a critique of traditional ways of conceptualising and measuring writing development, moving away from a framework focusing solely on textual products and changes in complexity, accuracy, and fluency and towards a closer consideration of (within-) individual variability and the role of context (e.g. Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Norris & Ortega, 2009).

In the field of academic writing, a growing concern about students as learners and writers has been accompanied by an interest in the languages, cultures, values, and attitudes of students. The conceptualisation of students as "multilingual" is intended to recognise that what each student brings to the academy needs to be seen as a resource for writing rather than a language problem or deficit (Canagarajah, 2002, 2013; Kramsch, 2009). This take on academic writing along with a focus on

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exploring multilingual students' heterogeneous understandings of what it means to “do” academic writing aligns with an “academic literacies” approach (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007). From this perspective, we are interested in what is at stake for each student as they participate in the practices surrounding the production of academic texts, including engaging with a particular academic context in the form of a disciplinary community. At the same time, disciplinary communities are understood within an academic literacies approach as constituted by scholars from diverse backgrounds with varying approaches to the knowledge of their discipline; academic communities are thus theorised as heterogeneous and dynamic (Lea & Street, 1998). Angélie-Carter's (2000) study of plagiarism and textual ownership in academic writing in a South African university context is a good example of a study employing such an approach. Angélie-Carter emphasizes the need for lecturers to become aware of their students' previous literacy experiences so that they are able to know how best to assist students to develop mastery over different academic discourses in order to build and extend knowledge.

As teachers in an EAP program (in which Academic English subjects are taught as part of students' undergraduate degrees), we approached this study with an interest in the ways our students interpret and negotiate the demands associated with written assignments. We opted for qualitative case studies as the method most likely to reveal the multiplicity and complexity of academic writing as theorised in recent scholarship. Our main aim was to explore the perceptions of academic writing held by three of our multilingual students and any changes that occurred in these as the students engaged in the process of researching and writing assignments in their first year of university. While the study documents the diversity and complexity of factors highlighted by the three multilingual students, it confirms a view of academic writing as a phenomenon situated in the disciplines and fundamentally social—with relations between student writers and texts/people at the heart of academic engagement.

2. Framing multilingual students' academic writing and its development

While this study focuses on our students' perceptions of academic writing and of their development as academic writers, it is important firstly to clarify our understandings of the key terms—“multilingual writer” and “academic writing.”

The term “multilingual writer” is beginning to appear more frequently in academic writing scholarship, although a review of relevant journals shows that “L2 writer” continues to be the preferred term. In the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, a number of authors have recently chosen to frame student writers as “multilingual” rather than as “L2.” The concept of the multilingual writer is used by Pomerantz and Kearney (2012) to make the point that—like Victoria, the Chinese graduate student in their study—multilingual students have at their disposal multiple resources for thinking about their writing experiences and potentially multiple ways of modelling what is “good” writing. The concept is central also to Kobayashi and Rinnert's (2013) study of Natsu, a Japanese “multicompetent” writer. The focus of their study is the extent to which Natsu's writing experiences and proficiency across Japanese, English, and Chinese shaped her perceptions of each language and of herself as a writer in the three languages. The authors present evidence of Natsu crossing or merging boundaries between the three languages (cf. Canagarajah, 2002) when, for example, she was generating ideas for writing or using personal anecdotes to emphasise her “Japanese identity.” One implication of such research is that EAP teachers need to be more “conscious of the writer's multilingual repertoire” (Pomerantz & Kearney, 2012, p. 222).

In a contribution to the “disciplinary dialogues,” published recently in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Canagarajah (2013) presents a strong argument in favour of the term “multilingual writer” rather than “second language writer.” He does this on the basis that it more accurately reflects contemporary understandings of language and of the majority of English language learners. For Canagarajah, globalisation means that languages are always in contact and influencing each other, and thus language learners are more often than not able to draw upon a range of resources associated with different languages (see also Kubota, 2013). The term “multilingual writer” is also used to challenge the idea that language learning is a relatively unproblematic and linear progression from beginner to native-speaker proficiency in L2. In the current paper, we take up the term “multilingual writer” and use it to refer to our students who are members of various communities simultaneously, and who in learning the language of a new community can draw on a multilingual repertoire of resources (Canagarajah, 2002; Kramsch, 2009).

In his “disciplinary dialogue,” Canagarajah (2013) is also critical of the notion of writing which he believes is embedded in the concept of “second language writing.” Recent theoretical orientations, Canagarajah holds, no longer view writing as solely about linguistic dimensions. A broader conceptualisation of writing includes the range of semiotic resources that contribute to the production of texts, including oral, visual, and numerical modalities (see also Canagarajah, 2002; Lemke, 1998), as well as the situated and dialogic nature of all writing (as theorized by Bakhtin, 1986). This view of academic writing sees it as a social act/activity, embedded in a writer's interactions with texts and people, both of which are considered as essential resources in the process of learning to write in discipline-specific ways (e.g. Hyland, 2013). While we as researchers hold this view, the question our paper addresses is what is the nature of academic writing from the perspective of our students. Do they, for example, believe academic writing is about engaging in dialogue with a disciplinary community; an activity that requires awareness of the disciplinary rhetoric as well as the capacity to write grammatically accurate and coherent prose?

These conceptual shifts in how we understand both the student writer and writing itself in academic contexts have been accompanied by a change in the kinds of questions asked and in the analytical tools employed. An academic literacies framework is one approach that views writing as practices, and in particular seeks participants' perspectives of the practices that surround text interpretation and production (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Wingate, 2012). If we want to

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