



From text to corpus — A genre-based approach to academic literacy instruction

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Abstract

Widening participation in Higher Education and a dramatic increase in the recruitment of overseas students has led to an urgent need for academic institutions to recognise the literacy demands they make of their students, and to respond to these students' learning needs. In this paper we report on the first phase of a discipline-specific academic writing project at King's College London. The instructional approach takes as its starting point the assessed academic genres which students have to write. Working within the tradition of genre based approaches to academic writing instruction, we have used the KCL Apprentice Writing Corpus to provide a databank of exemplars. These texts, along with grading and feedback information from academic departments, and input from disciplinary specialists, have provided the basis for discipline-specific writing courses which focus on strategically important assessed disciplinary genres (Critical Assignments in Applied Linguistics, and Laboratory Reports in Pharmacy). In this paper we discuss issues in corpus compilation, the selection of exemplars, and the rationale which has informed the development of the teaching resources. We also provide examples from the workshops offered as part of the courses. The paper concludes with a brief account of the evaluation of the courses, and a discussion of how corpus informed materials are being developed to extend the project in its second phase.

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1. Introduction

In the last few decades, internationalisation and widening participation in Western higher education systems have led to increasing diversity in the social, ethnic and linguistic composition of student populations. As a result, the extent to which students are prepared for the literacy requirements of the university varies considerably, and researchers such as [Lea and Street \(1998\)](#) and [Ivanic and Lea \(2006\)](#) have found that the support offered by universities in the UK tends to be inadequate as it often caters exclusively for a narrow set of target groups, neglecting the fact that students from all backgrounds are novices in the discourses and conventions of their chosen academic disciplines. In such a context, there is a need for truly inclusive approaches to teaching academic writing.

We have argued elsewhere ([Wingate and Tribble, 2012](#)) for the need to develop 'mainstream' instructional approaches to teaching academic literacy; approaches that are embedded into disciplinary curricula and accessible to all

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students. In the same paper, we have also argued that such approaches should combine the best aspects of existing theories and pedagogies, and should target all students rather than specific learner groups.

In this present paper we propose a model for writing instruction which draws on genre informed approaches to the analysis and explicit teaching of discipline-specific writing (e.g. Swales, 1990; Martin, 1993, 2000). This genre model takes into account theories that are oriented towards social practices such as Academic Literacies (e.g. Lillis and Scott, 2007) and Critical EAP (e.g. Benesch, 2001, by including opportunities for students to consider literacy practices, institutional power relations, and social roles in their analyses of disciplinary genres. However, the model stands in contrast to Academic Literacies as it:

- a) calls for explicit attention to textual exemplars from genres which are strategically important for students, and
- a) makes use of Vygotskian notions of scaffolding in which there is a need for collaboration between writing and subject experts and apprentice writers themselves, and in which a cycle of deconstruction, joint construction and independent construction is followed (Rothery, 1996).

The relative novelty of the approach we are proposing lies in its initial focus on a detailed analysis of small sets of texts from disciplinarily specific assessed student genres as the basis for the development of instructional materials, and the later use of discipline-specific corpora of student writing for the development of supplementary materials. In this way we hope to avoid the de-contextualisation which Martin points to in relation to corpus studies ‘that submerge unfolding texture in processes of counting and averaging that look for trends across texts rather than contingencies within them’ (Martin, 2004 cited in Coffin and Donohue, 2012: 69). This explains the title for our paper — *From text to corpus*.

As part of an institutionally funded project, we have collaborated with subject specialists in the disciplines of Applied Linguistics and Pharmacy at King’s College London, and in this paper, we offer examples of developing, implementing and evaluating the approach in these disciplines.

2. Background

2.1. Current approaches to teaching academic writing

Using the text-focused to writer-focused continuum proposed by Coffin and Donohue (2012), current approaches to teaching academic literacy can be broadly categorised into those which have texts as the starting point for analysis and instructional materials, i.e. English for Specific/Academic Purposes (ESP/EAP) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and those which give a primary emphasis to writers and have a socio-contextual focus, namely New Rhetoric, Academic Literacies and Critical EAP. The contrasts and overlaps between these traditions have been discussed elsewhere (Hyon, 1996; Bawarshi and Reiff, 2010; Coffin and Donohue, 2012). Within the scope of this paper, we would claim that, as yet, none of these approaches has made sufficient impact in terms of offering a mainstream pedagogy targeted at students from *all* backgrounds.

The reason for this lack of impact may be that each tradition has been developed in response to the needs of specific student populations, and is to some extent still limited to these contexts. Thus current ESP/EAP, arising from the teaching of English as a Foreign Language, has had a focus on L2 students, while SFL, originally developed for empowering students in the Australian school and adult education sectors, has only recently found some application to higher education (e.g. Woodward-Kron, 2007; Mahboob et al., 2012), and has not, as yet, made much impact outside Australia. The traditions that focus on social practices surrounding writing practices do not offer strong pedagogical models, either because they hold that explicit teaching is not effective, as in the case of New Rhetoric (e.g. Dias, 1994; Freedman and Medway, 1994), or, as in the case of Academic Literacies, the emphasis has been on research rather than pedagogy (Lillis and Scott, 2007). These writer oriented traditions are also constrained by their particular contexts (the Northern American college composition classes are the context for New Rhetoric, whilst the focus of Academic Literacies has been largely on ‘non-traditional’ students in UK universities) and have not been concerned with offering an inclusive literacy pedagogy.

The absence of a ‘mainstream’ pedagogy that would include all students enrolled in a study programme is obvious in the typical provision of academic literacy support in UK universities which broadly consists of two approaches. The first is targeted exclusively at non-native speakers of English, i.e. overseas and EU students. For this group, EAP courses are available, usually in English Language Centres. For the second group, the so called ‘home students’ (because they gained their entry qualifications in the UK and are therefore perceived as native speakers, even if they

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