

TRACING THE LEARNING OF ACADEMIC LITERACY IN A LITERATURE FOUNDATION COURSE

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Competence in academic literacy is still the main route to access and achievement within the university. First year students are expected to learn a number of discipline specific academic literacies with frequently conflicting and unarticulated uses of academic conventions. Through the analysis of the introductory paragraphs of one student in a literature foundation course, this article focuses on whether and how this student copes with the different demands presented by the simultaneous learning of different academic literacies. The analysis provides information about how this student built her understanding of academic literacy and her strategies for learning. The examination of her techniques and the need to explain why they are appropriate or not in a literature essay forced reflection on the thinking in the discipline that underlies such judgements.

INTRODUCTION

Despite contested understandings of academic discourse and concerns over possible cultural or ideological imposition, the competent reading and writing of academic discourse remains one of the main routes to access and achievement within the university. Helping students gain access to this discourse is the aim that underlies the Foundation Course in Literature (FCL) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).

Joan Turner (1999:151) clarifies two main uses of the term ‘academic discourse’:

On the one hand, then, academic discourse is a linguistic product whose rhetorical features can be analysed and taught, and on the other hand is a way of representing what can be considered to be academic thinking.

But academic thinking and the use of these rhetorical features differ across disciplines (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Bazerman, 1992; Hyland, 2000). In agreement with this position, there was a growth, in the 1990s, of discipline-specific Foundation Courses, including the FCL, in the Humanities Faculty at Wits. This discussion focuses on how one student responded to the simultaneous learning of different forms of academic literacy.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The FCL is a discipline-specific course which aims to prepare students for the successful study of literature at the first-year level. The emphasis in the FCL has been on helping students to explore how meanings are made in literature, by learning ways of reading, writing, arguing and providing evidence appropriate for the discipline. During the year, students study texts from a range of genres and periods, write eight formal essays and complete a number of

informal exercises, make group presentations and undertake a group research project. There is a weekly writing workshop in which essay drafts are discussed and re-worked.

The data discussed in this article were drawn from a larger, qualitative study (completed in 2002) of the development of student writer identity and voice and the learning of academic literacy in the essays written by students during one year in the FCL. The students also completed questionnaires designed to elicit information about their responses to the course and their writer identity. Over one hundred essays from fifteen students who volunteered were analysed for aspects of both general and discipline-specific academic literacy and for the construction of writer identity, after which the analysis and the essays were discussed in interviews with five of these students. The analysis of the introductions to the essays by one of these students, Lerato, is the focus here. Lerato, for whom English is only one of the five languages she speaks and reads, was also studying politics and attending a foundation course in Earth Sciences while in the FCL.

The student gave permission for her work to be discussed. The name used is a pseudonym.

This article focuses on a small part of the main study described above, namely on what was revealed through a close reading of the introductions to Lerato's essays, a reading enriched by the comments Lerato made in her interview and questionnaire. The initial analysis had not focused on essay introductions other than as one element of academic literacy, but a subsequent look at all the introductions to Lerato's essays together provided some information on the questions considered in this article. One such question concerns how students cope with the learning of different discipline-specific academic literacies. A particular question concerns whether Lerato has the ability to differentiate between different disciplinary expectations or, in other words, whether she has been 'socialised into the epistemological practices of [her] individual disciplines' (Samraj, 2008:56). Other questions focus on what this student's strategies for learning are and how she built her understanding of academic literacy. This limited focus on a specific section of the essays had other advantages. First, the introductions were easy to compare and seeing them together highlighted what the student had changed or retained. Secondly, because introductions and conclusions are arguably the more conventionalised sections of academic writing, they are likely to foreground discipline-specific conventions and disciplinary variations in ways of doing. Thirdly, the examination of the conventions that Lerato used and the need to find reasons for why they were appropriate or not in a literature essay, forced reflection on just what ways of thinking in the discipline underlie such judgements. The linguistic practices within a specific discipline are, as Bazerman (1992:64) sees it, 'developed in consonance with the goals of the [discipline's] projects' and so explaining why even the ordinary surface features in Lerato's essays conformed or did not conform to expectations of introductory paragraphs for a literature essay was a way of uncovering ways of thinking in our specific disciplinary context.

SITUATING THE DISCUSSION

The areas of research relevant to this discussion are those concerned with discipline-specific academic literacy, research into the conventions used in introductions in academic writing and research into the learning of academic discourse.

Ballard and Clanchy (1988:8) argue that discipline-specific academic literacies need to be explicitly taught so that '...the deep rules of the culture (that) shape the entire process of

student writing' can be learnt. But identifying differences between disciplines is not easy. In reality teachers are faced with what Bazerman (1992:64) calls the 'messy rhetorical complexity' within continually evolving disciplinary fields where there is not necessarily agreement about the ways of thinking or related practices. As Langer reports (1992), even participants seem to find it difficult to articulate those ways of thinking unique to their disciplines. Yet Langer (1992:85) argues for the need to attempt this because, '[w]hile the forms of comparisons, critiques or summaries can be discussed in general ways, if *only* the general characteristics are discussed, then the use of those forms in *particular* contexts will be lost'. Since this statement by Langer, much research has been done to identify the features of academic writing in individual disciplines (for example, Hewings, 2004; Hyland, 2000; Carstens, 2008). Genre theorists, in particular, have produced in-depth studies of the conventions found in specific academic genres such as theses (Thompson, P, 2005; Samraj, 2008; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006) or conference proposals (Halleck & Connor, 2006), with the research article being the focus for much of this research (Hyland, 1999; Samraj, 2001, 2005; Ozturk, 2007). Others have focused on academic literacy as social practice (Hyland, 2000, 2002, 2004; Ivanic, 1998), with some exploration of the use of academic conventions to express the interpersonal relations acceptable within specific disciplines (Hyland, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004; Thompson, G, 2001; Thompson, P, 2005; Paxton, Van Pletzen, Archer, Arend & Chihota, 2008). Another focus has been the identification of the features of specific sections of academic genres, with the conventions of introductions in varying genres within or across disciplines receiving much of this research attention (Samraj, 2001, 2005, 2008; Hood, 2004; Ozturk, 2007). However, apart from the work of Hood, and despite the existence of many manuals on undergraduate essay writing, there is little research on introductions in undergraduate essays within specific disciplines or on how students manage the learning of academic writing in different disciplines. In South Africa, with its diverse student population, interesting work has been done on the interaction of academic literacy and the students' 'prior literacies' (Leibowitz, 2001), on the development of 'interim literacies' (Paxton, 2007) and on literacies in transition (Bangeni & Kapp, 2006), but there is little information on how students manage the simultaneous learning of different forms of academic literacy. This discussion of Lerato's essay introductions attempts to provide some of this information in considering her strategies for learning to write academically acceptable introductions to her literature essays.

DISCUSSION

Literature as Discipline-Specific Literacy

The study of literature is an interpretive discipline in which students are urged to produce their own interpretations of the literary text. It is mainly these interpretations that are assessed by markers of literature essays. In interpretations, students are expected not only to discuss the main ideas or concerns in a text, but also to analyse how these are presented and explored. This means that the writers of literature essays must make evident the interpretive process through which their understanding of the ideas or concerns in the text was arrived at. In other words, students must transform their interpretations into academic analysis and argument.

In the weekly writing workshops, therefore, the focus is on encouraging the students' own responses to the literary texts and on helping them to turn these interpretations into literary argument. In teaching students to write introductions to a literature essay, the emphasis in the FCL is on encouraging them to state their responses to the essay topic, to take and state a

position on the issues being investigated and to develop a thesis that makes clear what they will argue in the essay. There is no explicit teaching of the linguistic formulations that could be used as part of an introduction. The aim is to have students convey their encounter with ideas and issues and not merely to seize upon what seem to be easily useable 'rules'.

Developing a thesis – from keywords to own words

The emphasis on students stating a thesis in the introductory paragraph reflects one of the skills valued in literature essays and one of the ways of knowing in the discipline – the ability to identify and articulate the issues raised in the text. Topic analysis, commonly involving the identification of keywords and the focus of the essay, is necessary before any thesis can be formulated. Markers of student essays are familiar with the ways in which students draw on the essay topics in their introductions, ranging from the formulaic repetition of the exact topic wording to the less formulaic listing of the actions required or the incorporation of key words into the introduction. The approach in the FCL is to encourage students to engage with the meanings and challenges of the topic and text and to avoid formulaic responses. An engagement with the topic requires the student to identify and respond to the question (which can be embedded) that is present in the topic.

(The assignments discussed below are numbered in the order in which they were written during the year, with two assignments being written in each academic quarter.)

An examination of all Lerato's introductory paragraphs shows her varying approaches, over the year, to stating a thesis. Although there are focused and thoughtful responses to the essay topic in some of her early introductions, they often draw heavily on the wording of the essay topics and make little attempt to develop a clear thesis. For example:

Assignment 2 Weep Not Child

Topic

By paying close attention to the relationship between Ngotho and Boro, discuss inter-generational conflict in the novel and the pressures that cause this conflict within Gikuyu society.

Introduction

The **inter-generational conflict** plays a very important role towards the developments of this novel. This assignment attempts to discuss and analyse the **pressures** that contribute to that particular **conflict**.

From her earliest essays, Lerato uses a range of strategies that enable a considered response to the topic. One strategy is to incorporate keywords or their synonyms, as she does in Assignment 2 (above) and Assignment 4, below:

Assignment 4

Topic

In Chinua Achebe's story 'Civil Peace', what kind of character is Jonathan Iwegbu and how does Achebe reveal him to us? Pay attention especially to what Jonathan says (dialogue), what he does (action) and what he thinks.

Introduction

Characterisation is one of the most important features of literature. Usually, one gets to know more about the character through the way he/she **talks**, what he **thinks** and what he **does**. Attempts are made to explore the **character of Jonathan** Igwebu in the story, 'Civil Peace' by Chinua Achebe.

Neither of these introductions does more than show that Lerato has correctly identified the areas for investigation in the essay and the keywords simply seem to function to get her

started rather than to say anything meaningful. Where she draws less directly on the keywords, she seems to free herself to move towards a more independent response to the essay topics. This occurs, for example, in assignments 1 and 3, where she uses a further strategy, that of identifying and answering the embedded questions in the topic. For example, in the first sentence of Assignment 1 she attempts to identify the main ideas in the poem and in the following sentence attempts to identify the ‘function and purpose of repetition and variation’.

Assignment 1 (Based on the poem ‘Virtue’ by George Herbert)

Topic

Carefully consider the whole of this poem, and then discuss *three examples of repetition and three examples of variation* in the poem which strike you as important.

In your discussion of each example, you need to consider *how it helps to convey or make clear some of Herbert’s main ideas* in the poem. You also need to discuss the *function or purpose* of repetition and variation in the poem.

Introduction

This poem is about the ever-living soul that survives every possible threat that finishes everything else off. In the poem, there are words, phrases and lines that are repeated in order to create a certain poetic effect for example to stress ideas or situations within the poem.

In her introduction to Assignment 3 she manages a partial answer to both the embedded questions; about the poet’s attitude to his ancestors and the values associated with their work:

Assignment 3 (‘Digging’ by Seamus Heaney)

Topic

In a critical analysis of the poem ‘Digging’ discuss the ways in which the poet reveals his attitudes towards his father and grandfather and the values he associates with the manner in which they did their work. Explain the similarities between his ancestors’ digging and the kind of poetry he wants to write and use examples from the poem to show whether he has succeeded in writing this kind of poetry.

Introduction

This poem ‘Digging’ is all about the poet who praises his ancestors, that is his father as well as his grandfather. Despite the fact that the work they do is difficult and straining (sic), the poet’s ancestors seem to accomplish it with great dexterity and skill.

In Assignment 5, Lerato uses a further technique, that of summarising some of the main ideas of the text to form a basic response to the essay topic, at the same time indirectly answering the embedded question.

Assignment 5 (Renaissance poetry)

Topic

Discuss the poet’s response to ‘tyrant time’s desire’ in the sonnet below.
(Daniel ‘From Delia’)

Introduction

This sonnet is all about time. Time dictates and commands everything to its ending. It seems as if time wants to destroy everything which is youthful and beautiful.

It is not until the introduction to Assignment 6 that Lerato takes more definite steps towards a thesis when she describes Macbeth’s speeches as revealing his ‘mixed feelings’, although this statement is not explicitly linked to the notion of ‘change’ highlighted in the essay topic.

Assignment 6 (Macbeth)

Topic

Critically analyse the two speeches below by Macbeth. In your analysis show the changes that have occurred since the first speech. (Extracts omitted)

Introduction

Throughout this play, Macbeth makes speeches which are different from each other. These speeches reveal Macbeth's mixed feelings on most of the issues that concern him. An attempt is made through this essay to compare and contrast Macbeth's two speeches.

First, Macbeth's first speech will be examined. Second, the analysis of the second speech will follow and finally a combined discussion on both speeches will follow.

In Assignment 7, Lerato, for the first time, takes a clearly-stated position and, in her comparison of the characters of the Mda and Dhlomo plays, moves towards a thesis, although this is only a partial response to the essay question.

Assignment 7

Topic

Thematically We Shall Sing for the Fatherland is unique as a South African play of its time. Rather than offering a simple condemnation of white racial capitalism or championing the cause of black solidarity, Mda presents a thought-provoking view of the interplay between race and class in a post-colonial African state.

Critically discuss the validity of this statement.

Introduction

Mda's plays are different from other plays written by South African playwrights. An attempt is made in this essay to examine and explore one of Mda's plays We Shall Sing For the Fatherland.

The statement about Mda's play We Shall Sing for the fatherland is correct. It is a different play of its kind because it is about the life of the ordinary people. Janabari and Sergeant are poor, homeless and without employment. (p.5). It is different from other plays such as H. Dhlomo's Cetshwayo which is about chiefs and other people from royal Zulu families (sic)...

Surprisingly, it is only in the introduction for Assignment 8 that she uses the technique of topic repetition before going on to develop a clear position and thesis. In the second paragraph Lerato develops an adequate thesis that is both a response to the essay topic and a statement of position – a significant advance in academic literacy.

Assignment 8

Topic

Below is an extract from an interview between Gabriel Garcia Marques and Plinio Apulezo Mendoza. Consider Garcia Marques's comments about the origins of machismo and write an essay where you discuss the relationship between men and women in Chronicle of a Death Foretold.

(Extract omitted)

Introduction

According to Marquez, 'Machismo in men and women is merely the usurpation of other people's rights'. (Mendoza, 1983, p. 108). An attempt is made in this essay to explore **the origins of Machismo** and how it affects **the relationship between men and women in Chronicle of a Death Foretold**.

It is a general idea, world-wide that men are superior than women and to a certain extent men seem to have power to force women to do whatever they wish. However, in this novel

Marquez presents a different perspective whereby women seem to dominate and control the society.

So throughout the year Lerato can be seen to be using different approaches, extending and improving on her attempts to write the kinds of introduction we were encouraging her to write.

From this examination of Lerato's introductions there seem to be two somewhat contradictory, perhaps more generally applicable, conclusions to be drawn about the ways topic analysis transfers into essay introductions. One is that student writers initially may need to link their writing of introductions closely to the wording of the topic, both as a way of starting to cover the blank page and as a way of re-assuring themselves that they have a relevant focus. The second is that it is when Lerato uses her own words that she is able to develop a thesis. This suggests that a reliance on the topic wording can prevent the thoughtful exploration necessary for the development of a thesis. For example, in the last assignment she does both, but it is when she moves beyond the topic wording that she is able to formulate a position and thesis. Yet in the more scientific discipline of Earth Sciences that Lerato was studying (which Hewings (2004:133) claims is dominated by 'the scientific methods paradigm'), such keyword repetitions may be appropriate for precise identification of essential essay components. The task for teachers of academic literacy is to help students use and incorporate the information obtained from topic analysis in ways most appropriate within the disciplines in which they are writing.

Learning Academic Discourse – experiments and approximations

Lerato is a meta-cognitively aware student in her approach to the learning of academic literacy and one of her strategies for learning is experimentation. Much of what she does in her introductions can be seen as developing an 'interlanguage' in her search for what constitutes academic literacy. The notion of 'interlanguage' was developed by S. Pit Corder, drawing on Selinker, in describing the process of learning an additional language. Corder uses the term to describe the intermediate, error-prone but rule-governed language developed by learners:

A learner's so-called errors are systematic, and it is precisely this regularity which shows that the learner is following a set of rules. ... By the study of the learner's utterances we attempt to describe this transitional language or 'interlanguage' as Selinker (1969) has called it... (Corder, 1973:149)

This suggests that students, rather than committing thoughtless errors, are generalising rules to new situations and are testing hypotheses they have formulated in earlier learning. Kutz (1986:385) uses this term from the discipline of second language acquisition in her discussion of the learning of academic literacy and applies the term to the 'middle ground ... between the student's language and academic discourse'. She sees academic discourse as similar to a new language and argues that '[i]nterlanguage provides a conceptual framework for seeing student writing as a stage in a developmental process...' (1986:393). This is useful in considering the 'approximations' (Bartholomae, 1988) of the features of other forms of academic literacy that Lerato is making in her introductions to literature essays. A learner-writer of academic discourse like Lerato seems to be attempting, in the same way as language learners, to identify the conventions of academic literacy from courses beyond the FCL and incorporating such elements into her essays, so generalising what she has learnt in one situation to another. What

becomes clearer as we examine these introductions is that, throughout the year, Lerato has been experimenting with the many requirements of academic literacy as she has come to understand it from the different academic disciplines she has encountered. In the other courses in which Lerato was studying (refer to p. 2), emphasis was placed on the use of more formal academic literacy conventions, such as an impersonal tone, and more conventionally formulated introductions and conclusions than are taught in the FCL. The fact that no linguistic conventions for introduction writing were provided in the FCL seems to have encouraged her to borrow the more explicitly defined conventions from this other form of academic literacy.

One example of this is Lerato's repetition of some of the exact topic wording in her introduction to Assignment 8. She partially re-states the topic and then moves on to use her own words to formulate a thesis, suggesting that this repetition of phrases from the topic, inserted only in this later assignment, is the application of a 'rule' learnt elsewhere.

Although Lerato often uses the formulaic 'This essay will attempt...', it is only in Assignment 6 that she experiments more fully with a technique frequently taught in academic literacy classes; the listing of what the student intends to do in the essay. This technique, at the planning stage, has the merit of helping the student to clarify what needs to be done in an essay, but in an introduction is more suited to social science or scientific disciplines that require precision in the treatment of observable data. The listing of intentions is not seen as useful in a literature essay, as the marker's comment on Lerato's introduction to Assignment 6, that this is 'rather obvious', indicates.

There is another example of such a transfer in the conclusion to Lerato's last assignment where she uses a concluding formulation that seems to have been borrowed from a more scientific discourse: 'The intensions (sic) and objectives stated in the introduction have been achieved and from that in mind one may say that machismo is a product of matriarchal societies.' Lerato is aware that concluding formulations perform certain functions but not that the restatement of objectives in this concluding formulation is inappropriate for a literature essay. Her use of a new formulation in this, her last literature essay, seems to indicate that she has not stopped experimenting – but also, worryingly, that she is still unaware that academic discourse is used differently in different disciplines.

The interview with Lerato at the end of the academic year helped to confirm that she is drawing on her developing knowledge of academic literacy conventions from the varying forms of academic literacy present within her academic context. When asked whether she had found learning the conventions of academic literacy a constraint or not on her writing, she replied:

I think it's not a restriction. It's helpful because when you try to present your writing, your introduction and stating clearly what you're going to do, it helps you to organize your own points....

Delpit (1988) has argued for the value of making conventions explicit and Belcher and Braine (1995:xv) maintain that: '...it is obvious to many ESL/EFL...teachers that their students welcome guidance through the mystifying labyrinth of academic discourse'. This student certainly seems to find it re-assuring to use those conventions that she has been told are required and acceptable. It is possible that, for beginner writers of academic discourse in English as an additional language, these conventions, by providing guidelines for language

use and for structuring thought, paradoxically, give the student a greater sense of freedom and the confidence to focus on expressing their ideas.

However, in expressing her ideas, Lerato resorted to an impersonal writer identity even though in literature essays a less formal writer identity is now acceptable, even expected, and impersonal language forms had never been taught in the FCL. What is noticeable is the avoidance of the first person pronoun, the use of formal phraseology and the use of the passive voice in phrases such as ‘Attempts are made.../An attempt is made.../This assignment attempts...’ (in Assignments 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8). This impersonal writer identity was criticised by some English department markers because changing notions about the construction of knowledge in an interpretive discipline require writers to take more responsibility for their interpretations. In her interview, Lerato explained that she had been conforming to the requirements of other disciplines: ‘They don’t like us to use this first person narration.’ This was also her reason for her use of the passive form: ‘So, in other departments they encourage this thing of the passive voice. First this will be analysed...’.

It is obvious that the deliberate lack of discussion in the FCL about impersonality as a convention had led Lerato to transfer into her literature essays the rules learnt in other disciplines. For her, as for all first-year students attempting to learn a range of discipline-specific literacies, the challenge is to realise, firstly, that these different forms of academic literacy exist, and then to identify the often unarticulated, sometimes conflicting, and almost certainly unexplained, conventions preferred within the different disciplines (not to mention those preferred by individual lecturers).

CONCLUSION

The main aim of the FCL was to help students acquire an understanding of what is involved in the study of literature at university, including the writing of essays in the discipline, and the analysis of the complete essays written by Lerato allowed for conclusions to be drawn as to whether this was achieved by this student. The analysis of the introductions to Lerato’s essays can only provide evidence for a discussion of how successfully the FCL managed to teach one aspect of discipline-specific academic discourse – the writing of what are considered to be acceptable introductions to literature essays. The results are mixed.

In terms of what was specifically taught – that introductions should include the articulation of a thesis, a response to the topic, engagement with the issues – it is clear that Lerato is attempting these and to some extent succeeding. However, the fact that the FCL refrained from teaching any specific linguistic formulations allowed for interference from other disciplines and the inappropriate insertion of those formulations which Lerato obviously found ‘helped when you try to present your writing’.

This discussion of aspects of the writing of one student identifies challenges for the simultaneous teaching of discipline-specific academic literacies and the need to change some practices in the FCL. Rather than ignoring the students’ need for guidelines, we need to make explicit the reasons why certain conventions are used or not used in the discipline and how the use of conventions is related to ways of thinking and to beliefs about the relationship of the writer to the knowledge expressed.

Unfortunately, this active experimentation and learning by Lerato was not seen until all the essays were analysed together at year-end. This examination showed it would have been

valuable to monitor the experiments she was conducting as she conducted them. Time and cost constraints make such analysis difficult, but one suggestion is that lecturers work closely with trained post-graduate tutors who monitor the essay drafts of a small group of student writers and highlight developments of concern. Another would be to focus on a specific aspect of student writing and trace developments, as done with introductions in this article. This can yield valuable information. The use of comment sheets in which students reflect on the writing of their essay drafts has proved a useful way to surface puzzles and confusions about the use of academic discourse. Lerato's introductions provide evidence of the complications involved in the teaching and learning of even the simplest aspects of academic discourse. Comparative work on the differing use of conventions across the disciplines has been done on published academic writing (Hyland, 2000) and student writing across disciplines (Hyland, 2002, 2004) while Paxton *et al.* (2008) have extended Hyland's work by looking at writer stance in academic writing across disciplines at their university, but more situated work needs to be done. There is still an argument to be made for the value of discipline-specific foundation courses, but more collaboration between tutors and more comparative teaching of the different uses of academic conventions across disciplines should help streamline the sometimes inappropriate, but not valueless, experimentation seen in Lerato's essays and help students to use academic literacy more accurately and knowledgeably.

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