

EAP Students Should Focus on Discipline-Specific Writing Skills

By Percival Santos

Introduction

Undergraduate students majoring in a discipline pass through four phases in their development as writers: non-academic writing skills in the first phase, generalized academic writing in the second one, novice disciplinary writing in the third part, and finally expert insider writing occurs in the final phase. Foundation programs for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students traditionally teach generalized academic writing and these students will only start to learn discipline-specific writing once they enter their majors programs.

This paper will argue that novice disciplinary writing should be introduced in EAP foundation programs because it is important for students to write like disciplinary insiders by their senior year. They need to be able to write like expert insiders if they are to succeed in their major. For students to write expert insider prose they need to view disciplines as discourse communities. Academic publications are a product of a discourse community and literature reviews are an important element of that.

The paper is based on my experience teaching Academic Writing at an EAP Foundation Programme at the Dongbei University of Finance and Economics (DUFE) in Dalian, China. DUFE in partnership with the University of Surrey jointly offer an undergraduate degree in either Business or Tourism Management. These are popularly

known as the '2 + 2 Dual Degree Programme' following a British or Chinese track. In both tracks, students spend the first two years in an EAP Foundation Program. After leaving EAP they can take the British track whereby they transfer to Surrey University for their final two years. If they choose the Chinese track they stay in DUFE for the full duration of their undergraduate studies majoring in business or tourism in English. Students in both tracks will receive degrees from both institutions upon graduation.

This paper will focus on high-proficiency learners, those students who are at an acceptable, even high level of linguistic proficiency when they enter the EAP foundation program. Such students are believed to already possess good non-academic writing skills, and are thus able to acquire academic writing skills without too many difficulties. It will not address the issue of low-proficiency students who enter the EAP foundation program.

The Four Developmental Phases of Academic Writing

American university students go through four phases of writing. They enter university with non-academic writing skills in the first phase. They go on to the second one, which is generalized academic writing, when they take freshman composition courses. The third phase, novice

disciplinary writing, occurs when they start to take early courses in their major. And finally, they acquire expert insider writing skills as they take advanced courses in their senior year (Macdonald, 1994).

These four phases of writing skill development also apply to Chinese undergraduate students doing a foundation year EAP program with the intention of pursuing a degree in an English-speaking environment such as the Dual Degree currently jointly offered by DUFE and Surrey University. High-proficiency Chinese students at DUFE who already possess non-academic writing skills, the first phase, enter our two-year EAP foundation program with a view to acquiring generalized academic writing skills, corresponding to the second phase. The third phase, novice disciplinary writing, occurs when our students leave EAP to take early courses in their major either at DUFE or Surrey. Finally in phase four, they should acquire expert insider writing skills as they progress toward the senior year in their chosen discipline.

The existence of freshman composition courses for native speaker students rests on the assumption of a common core of academic lexis and discourse between generalized and disciplinary writing. Likewise, the assumption of “generic academic practices that can be applied anywhere on campus” sustains the English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) approach in many foundation programs (Hartigan, 2013, p. 27). But little of what native English-speaking students learn in first-year composition transfers directly into disciplinary courses (Macdonald, 1994). In the same manner, there is little empirical evidence that much of the generalized academic writing skills students learn in foundation EAP programs are directly transferable to their post-EAP coursework. Although some generic skills like skimming, scanning, paraphrasing etc. are shared by all disciplines (Jordan, 1997), students can learn these generic skills at the same time as they start learning novice disciplinary writing skills. In addition, there is no need for EAP students to master a “common core” of General English before they learn discipline specific English as it is already a part of specific Academic English (Hartigan, 2013, p.27).

Hyland (2002) proposes teaching discipline-specific EAP early on. According to Hartigan (2013):

More specificity in subject vocabulary earlier in a foundation program will aid lexical development, save time by being more efficient, and allow for more recycling of subject-specific vocabulary and more retention of that knowledge. Using subject-specific genre for writing opportunities will also increase student motivation, as students will be able to see the usefulness of their work. Students also will have more opportunities to practice writing (and reading) in genres specific to their discipline. Finally, more specificity might be a way to balance mixed ability classes so that higher-level students do not lose interest, while lower-level students are supported (p. 30).

Following this line of reasoning, I will argue that the second phase, generalized academic writing, should be considerably reduced or even eliminated altogether. I propose that we introduce novice disciplinary writing, or stage three, in the freshman year. I am well aware that this proposal has its share of critics, who believe that all students must have a solid grounding in ‘the basics’ before embarking on discipline specific skills. However, this gradual approach from General to Specific English is “not supported by current research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). SLA research indicates that students acquire language features, including lexis, as needed, rather than in the order instructors teach them” (Hartigan, 2013, p. 26).

Insider Prose

When both native speakers and EAP students enter their chosen majors at stage three, they essentially start over as writers, producing novice approximations of disciplinary discourse. This is because they have not yet learned how the new discipline poses questions, analyses evidence, applies theories, or produces arguments in conversation with other scholars. It is important for students to reach stage four by their senior year. To be able to write like an insider means they can write like historians, chemists, psychologists, etc. They need to be able to write like expert insiders if they are to succeed in their major.

Expert insider prose requires six different

kinds of knowledge or skill sets (see Figure 1). Four of these are practiced in first-year writing courses, specifically, writing process knowledge, entry-level information literacy, some rhetorical knowledge, and some introductory knowledge about different genres. The other two, which are discourse community and subject matter knowledge, tend to be taught when students take content courses in a discipline.

I propose that students start learning about the discourse community knowledge of at least one or more disciplines during the foundation program. That is, they first start their novice apprenticeship learning about discourse community knowledge while in EAP. This would mean that students learn five out of six kinds of

knowledge or skill sets needed to write expert insider prose during the foundation year. They can later learn subject matter knowledge, the sixth and last skill set, when they specialize in their chosen disciplines.

Discourse Communities

A particular discipline should be understood as a discourse community. It often has a different view of knowledge, a different research practice, and a different way of seeing the world. The term community does not necessarily mean that all members of these intellectual and discourse groups agree on everything. Nor does it mean



Figure 1: Six Skill Sets of Insider Prose (Beaufort, 2007)

that they have to be geographically close to one another to form such a community. For Barton (1994):

A discourse community is a group of people who have texts and practices in common, whether it is a group of academics, or the readers of teenage magazines. In fact, discourse community can refer to the people the text is aimed at; it can be the people who read a text; or it can refer to the people who participate in a set of discourse practices both by reading and writing (p. 57).

Belonging to a discipline implies learning to use language in disciplinarily approved ways and

becoming a member of a discourse community. Being a member of a discipline means knowing how to pose questions, analyse evidence, apply theories, and produce arguments in conversation with other members.

For the sake of simplicity and pedagogical expediency, I will gloss over some of the complexities of the concept of the discourse community. I shall present a simplified version of it with the purpose of facilitating student understanding and eventual development of disciplinary writing skills.

Disciplines can be one of two general types; those that are in broad agreement on many basic issues in their field, and those that are not. The first kind of discipline shares a surprising

uniformity of views. There are no major controversies regarding the nature of study, the questions they ask or problems they pose, and the data and analytical tools they use.

EAP students should acquire disciplinary writing skills during the foundation program because the third phase, novice approximations of disciplinary discourse, is when they start to think of disciplines as discourse communities. These students should be encouraged to view themselves as members, or at least future members, of a particular discipline and its discourse community as early as the foundation year. According to Hyland (2006), learning a discipline implies:

learning to use language in disciplinarily approved ways. It involves learning a specialized discourse for reading and writing for presenting orally, for reasoning and problem solving, and for carrying out practical research activities (p. 38).

Literature Reviews

When academics write, they join a conversation. To show they understand this they refer to what others have already written about their subject. By referring to what others have said about a topic, writers accomplish two things: they show that they are addressing an issue that matters, and they establish that there is more to be said about it. It is with this goal of treating students as future apprentices of a discipline in mind whereby I will describe the literature review's place in academic writing. The literature review is arguably the purest expression of a discourse/disciplinary community. To be members of a discipline, in particular to be consumers and producers of knowledge of a discipline, students must be able to comprehend its fundamental role and function.

I shall now describe three basic kinds of literature review. The first two, Gap in Knowledge and State of the Art, are examples of literature reviews in disciplines that share a broad consensus on theoretical, epistemological, and methodological issues. The third one, aptly named Establishing a Controversy, pertains to those that have less consensus on major issues (Bean, 2011, p. 243).

Gap in Knowledge

This kind of literature review is common in the physical sciences and in some social sciences. It shows what is known and not known about an empirical problem and aims to fill the gap through new research (Bean, 2011, p. 244). It has four parts:

- 1) Orientation or introduction
Issue x has been a prominent subject of much research.
Issue x has attracted a lot of attention in the field of y.
- 2) Previous studies
Author A was concerned with topic y.
Several authors (D, E, F) addressed problem y.
Authors A and B examined problem z.
Author A studied issue y with a view to accomplishing z.
Work by author A researched topic y.

- 3) Establishing a gap
Nevertheless, aspect x still needs to be addressed.
However, question x remains unanswered.
However, a solution to the issue of x still has not been found.

- 4) Gap to be filled
This paper will propose a solution to issue x.
This essay will address problem x by doing y.

State of the Art

This kind of literature review often appears in professional disciplines where "experts apply their knowledge and skills to clients' problems". The writer's goal is to present the "state of the art" view of experts on an issue or question and then to come up with a new solution to it (Bean, 2011, p. 244). It has three parts:

- 1) Orientation or introduction
Issue x has been a prominent subject of much research.
Issue x has attracted a lot of attention in the field of y.
- 2) Present the 'state of the art'
Research in the area of x has followed several avenues.

Early work by Authors A, B and C was concerned with y.

Authors D and E compared x and y.

Additional work by Author F deals with z.

Several researchers addressed the problem x.

Authors G, H and I studied various aspects of this subject. Author G has demonstrated that X. Y was developed by Author H. The general results are similar to those reported by Author I.

3) Present a solution

In this paper, we present an analytical framework for x.

In this paper, we propose a new solution for x.

Establishing a Controversy

This kind of literature review is common in the humanities. The writer typically summarizes scholarly works that take competing points of view on a problem or controversy and then stakes out a claim that either supports one side but adds something new, or reframes the debate (Bean, 2011, p. 243). It has the following parts (a combination of either 1 and 2, or 1 and 3):

1) Establish a controversy

The literature on issue x falls broadly into two camps/sides. Camp A states that...camp B asserts that...

There is a difference in opinion regarding issue x. Author A believes..... Author B asserts that...

2) Reframe the debate

Issue x has been overlooked in this debate.

The literature has not sufficiently addressed the importance of issue x.

3) Support one side

It is my belief that author A's opinion regarding issue x is more valid/convincing/persuasive/etc.

Incorporating Literature Reviews in EAP

There are many ways to incorporate the teaching of literature reviews in a foundation program. One possible way would apply to those foundation programs where most students will

eventually major in one single field such as business studies, science and engineering, medicine, etc. It would have the following stages:

- introduce the idea of a disciplinary or discourse community
- identify the kind of discourse community a discipline in question belongs to
- describe the function and structure of the relevant literature review
- read a literature review and identify the previous studies, areas of agreement and disagreement, solution, etc.
- write a literature review

Foundation programs in a multi-faculty institution that function more like feeder courses for a diverse range of majors and specializations may use a slightly different way:

- introduce the idea of a disciplinary or discourse community
- identify the kind of discourse community a discipline in question belongs to
- describe the function and structure of the relevant literature review
- read a literature review and identify the previous studies, areas of agreement and disagreement, solution, etc.
- write a literature review on a topic within a discipline

Conclusion

This paper has described the four phases of development that Chinese undergraduates go through as they pursue a degree taught in English. It has argued for the teaching of novice disciplinary writing skills in EAP because students need to be able to write like expert insiders if they are to succeed in their major. Undergraduates are already a part of a discipline's discourse community because they are expected to read texts written by experts in that discipline. Knowing how to read and write literature reviews like a disciplinary insider will further consolidate their status as members of their discourse communities.

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