7 The Construction of Academic Literacy on the BA in Educational Studies (TESOL): A Case Study

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1 BACKGROUND

There has been little study of the acquisition of academic literacy on the BA Educational Studies (TESOL) and what has been carried out focuses rather narrowly on writing alone. Two related studies, one quantitative, the other qualitative, both with a focus on writing product, were carried out in 2004-2005 (see Chapter 14) and are discussed in this volume. The first study analysed stretches of text from assignments written at the start and at the end of the degree programme, with regard to T-units (see Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998). The study found that the writings showed common though not uniform developments in fluency, accuracy and complexity. The second study involved retrospective reports by the graduates whose assignments had been analysed in the first study, who reported, collectively, sixty-seven specific changes relating to structure, analysis, support, coverage and presentation. Under support for example, the group noted a lengthy list of developments including: 'better able to support assertions made with evidence/ argument/ theory; better able to use quotes to illustrate the point being made; better choice of examples for points being made; better integration of quotes into argument.'

However, interesting though these studies were, their findings were actually fairly predictable. The principal form of assessment on the BA was the 3,000-word assignment, always following the same generic structure of introduction, theoretical framework, practical application and conclusion + scholarly appendices. So it is unsurprising that successful graduates – and the participants sampled all achieved upper second class honours - should (uniformly) report developments related to the writing of such assignments. Their success would not have been possible had they not acquired such skills.

What now needs to be investigated is 'How did they do it?' This is a particularly pertinent question to ask because the BA posed its students with a working process quite unlike anything else in the region and one that at first sight was not especially

promising. Tardy (2006) in a comprehensive survey of genre acquisition studies makes a distinction between 'practice-based' contexts in which genre knowledge is acquired (in Krashen's 1985 sense of the word) and 'instructional' contexts in which learners are taught how to produce genre-texts. The dominant model in higher education in the Gulf region is probably instructional. To take one example from Oman, on admission to the Colleges of Applied Sciences (Ministry of Higher Education), students take General English and Study Skills courses for up to a year before admission to the first year of a degree programme. Further, up to half of the first year of the degree programme will be devoted to additional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) studies. Such studies do not target discipline-specific genres but concentrate on developing generic strategic reading and essay-writing skills. The BA presented students with a wholly different experience. For one thing, BA students were also full-time teachers, released from their schools for a day a week and using their holiday periods to attend intensive courses. Secondly, the students went straight into the second level of a three-level BA: within three months of starting the course each student was expected to produce the first of a series of 3,000-word assignments. Thirdly, the only pre-course preparation was a two-week basic EAP course and the only formal EAP instruction actually occurred in the second, not the first year of the programme.

However, this apparent lack of support needs to be qualified. BA students were provided with two sources of support that may have been very important to their acquisition of academic literacies. Firstly, they were taught consistently through English, which meant that tutors and students had to construct and negotiate their understandings of concepts through English. Secondly, they were offered support with their assignments throughout the programme, but especially with the first three. Working to Ministry of Education Guidelines for Support, approved by the University of Leeds, Regional Tutors (RTs) facilitated discussion of rubrics, of task demands, of the stages of the assignment genre (introduction, theoretical framework, practical application, conclusion, the scholarly appendices) and offered carefully moderated feedback on outlines and portions of drafts.

Interestingly, given the apparent disadvantages under which students worked on the BA, success rates were very high, slightly less than 90% overall (Atkins, 2009). Given the relatively uneven performance of students working in more conventional instructional contexts in the region, it would seem highly worthwhile to look at the process students on the BA went through in constructing their literacies.

2 ACADEMIC LITERACY WITHIN THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Three key concepts serve to underpin the conception of academic literacy constructed in this study: discourse community, community of practice and genre.

The concept of 'discourse community' (Swales, 1990) and the concept of 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) are both central to the idea of literacy, for it is within disciplinary discourse communities (e.g. the TESOL

profession) and within institutional communities of practice (e.g. a specific university TESOL department) that individuals learn to discourse in the specific ways that both characterize their communities and confer legitimacy on individuals as members of those communities: to achieve an academic literacy is to learn to discourse in the ways sanctioned by a specific community.

This leads us to the central importance of genre for as Hyland (2002:43) notes "Essays, reports, memos, dissertations, and so on, are not overarching genres, nor does the ability to produce them require generic writing skills…[students must] discover how valued text forms and practices are socially constructed in response to the common purposes of target communities". To achieve academic literacy within specific communities students must learn how to master the specific genre communications that characterize the community. As Johns (1997:14) notes "Those who can successfully produce and process texts within certain genres are members of communities, for academic learning does not take place independent of these communities".

On the BA Educational Studies (TESOL), taught in Oman, students had to develop familiarities with a range of genres, for example the academic article, but the primary genre, the one that determined their legitimacy as members of the community, was the undergraduate assignment, which at University of Leeds, School of Education, is a 3,000-word text following a set format of introduction loosely serving the functions identified by Swales (1990) framework drawing on the literature, a practical application or extension of the theoretical framework, e.g. the analysis of classroom data, a conclusion both summing up what has been learned and identifying implications, followed by scholarly appendices, the whole conforming to Anglophone academic conventions of register and reference.

However to look simply at the end product is to distort the picture of literacy development. The completion of the written assignment was actually only the last of four key cognitive-rhetorical problems, the first of which was the construction of a representation of the assignment task, the second the construction of a conceptual framework, the third the design and execution of the practical application. To achieve academic literacy - to participate legitimately - within the School of Education, University of Leeds, students had to learn to tackle all four of these cognitive-rhetorical problems.

3   THE ACQUISITION OF GENRE KNOWLEDGE

There have been a number of important surveys in the area of academic literacy e.g. Canseco & Byrd (1989), and Casanave & Hubbard (1992). The latter study, for example, indicated that teachers across the humanities and sciences viewed quality of content and ideas as more important in academic writing than surface features. However, such studies, by their nature, fail to provide the diachronic perspective necessary to understand acquisition, nor, typically, do they provide the 'thick description' necessary to understand acquisition in specific cases. For these reasons, Braine (2002) has concluded that only (longitudinal) case study research can fully illuminate the acquisition process and this is the approach adopted in this study.

There are now a large number of case-studies in the area of literacy development and genre-acquisition and a few useful overview surveys such as Tardy's (2006). The distinction Tardy makes between practice-based and instruction-based is not watertight as the research discussed below shows but it is, nevertheless, a useful guide. The studies seem to indicate that a fairly wide range of factors may be involved in genre acquisition. These factors may be grouped as follows: textual interactions of various kinds; interpersonal interactions of various kinds; individual factors such as the prior knowledge of genre learners bring with them and individual approaches to learning and writing. This list is not comprehensive but for the present study they are the main ones.

Johns (1997) argues that an understanding of genre and of the purposes and structures of particular genres only happens through repeated exposure to different genre exemplars in different discourses. Other studies (Riazi, 1997) have emphasized the role of text-production and the (often painful) process of attempting to construct and express meaning through genre forms. The interaction of reading and writing and the role of these textual interactions in developing genre knowledge has been noted by among others Haas (1994) and Tardy (2005). Learner academic writers often consciously exploit texts with regard to their genre features. Ivanic (1998), studying L1 undergraduates and Riazi (1997), Angelova & Riazantseva (1999), and Tardy (2005) studying L1 and L2 postgraduates found that learner writers often 'mine' texts, picking up formulae, fragments of text or larger discourses. However the range of textual interactions that appear to facilitate genre acquisition are not limited to interactions with published sources: a number of studies point out the role of students' previous work (Dong, 1996), assignment rubrics (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Riazi, 1997), lesson/session materials or notes (Casanave, 1995; Riazi, 1997), with writing guides (Dong, 1996), and with their own text-in-progress (Casanave, 1995).

A large number of studies indicate the importance of a range of interpersonal interactions. The role of peer-interactions has been studied by among others Casanave, (1995), Connor & Mayberry, (1996) Angelova & Riazantseva, (1999), the role of interactions with working colleagues (Smart, 2000, in Tardy 2006), and the role of oral and written feedback from mentors or other people with greater degrees of expertise (Casanave, 1995; Riazi, 1997, Spack, 1997, Flowerdew, 2000, Tardy, 2005). All of these have significant impacts on genre acquisition though the quality of such interactions is probably crucial and may be affected by a wide range of factors. Flowerdew (2000) discusses linguistic and geographic distance, Belcher (1994) and Dong (1996), mentoring styles, Gosden (1996) power relations and perhaps most importantly Angelova & Riazantseva (1999) and Connor & Mayberry (1996) discuss the expectations of mentor and mentee and the degree to which these are shared or mutually intelligible. Practice-based contexts, by their nature, tend to exclude systematic instruction but there are one or two studies that show that learners benefit from it (Gentil, 2005). Gentil's L2 writer felt that instructor feedback had helped her understand how to make knowledge claims in English.

Another factor that appears to be relevant is the interaction of subject-matter knowledge and genre-knowledge. Berkenkotter et al. (1988) found that their case-

study participant developed 'declarative' or content knowledge before developing 'procedural' or genre/rhetorical knowledge. The research suggests that the procedural knowledge was constructed through engagement with the subject-matter. Haas (1994) and Spack (1997) both indicated that as knowledge of subject-matter increased so did rhetorical and genre knowledge. This is perhaps unsurprising given that genres are discipline-specific and they exist to facilitate the discourses of the discipline.

The remaining group of studies consider individual differences in various ways. It is inevitable that case-study research with its microscopic focus would tend to emphasise such differences but some account must be given of them. One key factor that has been demonstrated is prior knowledge and expectations of genre. In approaching new genres learner writers make use of their prior genre knowledge (Spack, 1997; Ivanic, 1998) to make sense of the new genres they are tackling. There is evidence however that this use of prior knowledge may both help and hinder acquisition of the new genre. A second factor concerns the different ways in which learners approach learning and the strategies they use (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Gosden, 1996) though there is little conclusive evidence that particular approaches or strategies consistently work better than others. A final group of studies address the issue of individual identity directly. The way a learner writer's sense of their identity changes as they develop an academic literacy, especially the way that sense of identity – for or against - relates to membership of a community, has been studied by a number of writers (Ivanic, 1998; Berkenkotter et al., 1998; Tardy, 2005).

Broadly speaking, I would argue that these groups of studies confirm Riazi's conclusion "that achieving disciplinary literacy in an L2 … is fundamentally an interactive social-cognitive process in that production of the texts require[s] extensive interaction between the individual's cognitive processes and social/contextual factors in different ways" (Riazi, 1997:105). It is the purpose of the present study to apply these findings to the Omani context in which the author has worked and to identify which of the factors above appears to be relevant in the acquisition of academic literacy.

4   METHODS

The single case-study reported here is part of a multiple case-study investigation into the acquisition of academic literacy of three Omani participants on the BA in Educational Studies (TESOL) over the period of a full calendar year, that is, over the period of the writing of the first three BA assignments (EDUC 2031, 2032 and 2033). The participant in the case-study reported here, Miad (the name is a pseudonym), was an experienced teacher in her thirties who commenced the study with an IELTS level of approximately 5.5/6.0. She had completed a Diploma level teacher training programme in Oman but had no other experience of academic study. Moreover, her diploma studies required very little academic writing in English. She was ultimately successful in her BA studies, achieving an Upper Second Class degree. She passed each of the three assignments covered in the data-collection period with good grades (B, B and A in that sequence).

The study attempted to answer the following questions:

1.   How did Miad approach the four core cognitive-rhetorical problems over the course of the year?
2.   What patterns of strategic interaction emerged over the course of the year?
3.   What factors did Miad indicate facilitated her completion of the assignments?

Data relating to process was gained from audio-logs kept by the participant during her writing of the first three assignments, and interviews conducted after her completion of the assignments. Both logs and interviews were transcribed, conventionally. Supplementary data was collected from a range of textual sources: assignments, drafts, emails and tutorial notes.

Analysis of the log data was carried out in the following manner. The log was read and reread to identify the type of data it presented. Although the respondent had been briefed before the start of the recording process to report in detail 'all the things that she did' to get the assignment finished, once started, the researcher had no further input in the process and it was very much up to the respondent to shape the log as she wished. So the first stage of the analysis was to identify the kind of information it contained. This turned out to be a detailed record of Miad's activities, which – from an impressionistic perspective – offered a rich description of her process including thoughts and actions. However, the very richness of the data posed significant challenges for the analysis with regard to validity, reliability and economy.

It was clear that the analysis would have to show two things: what Miad did and how her activities related to the four core cognitive-rhetorical problems of the assignment but within these broad terms it was unclear what framework of categories could be used. The researcher was initially tempted to employ a pre-fabricated framework drawn from the literature review but decided against this in order to remain 'true to the data'. This was felt to be important because the body of data is unique: no published studies have included logs of this kind, this level of detail or kept over such long periods of time. So, the approach adopted was more or less the 'Grounded theory' approach outlined by Glaser (1998) in which units of analysis – daily log entries in this case - are coded and recoded in a cyclical and interactive process to produce a single set of process categories that are (a) comprehensive and (b) economical. The principal set of categories developed related to interactions: they specified with whom or with what, Miad interacted. A further set of categories, employed where data was available, related to how these interactions were carried out to shed light on Miad's strategic choices.

Analysis of the interview data was carried out in the following manner: after transcription, the interviews were divided up into question/answer exchanges – the basic unit for analysis. As the focus of the questions determined the scope of the answers, developing a categorization system was a much more straight-forward process than with the logs. Each Q/A unit was coded according to factors noted by the respondent as facilitating her acquisition of academic literacy. A comprehensive list was derived and categorization standardized.

In both cases reliability was assured in two ways: by having a 10% sample of the total data categorized by an independent rater and by re-categorization by the main researcher at six-month intervals.

5 FINDINGS

5.1. How did Miad approach the four core cognitive-rhetorical problems over the course of the year?

The working periods in the three phases varied somewhat: seven continuous weeks in Phase 1, fourteen weeks of intermittent work in Phase 2 and eight continuous weeks in Phase 3. The number of log entries, which gives a rough idea of the amount of time she devoted to the assignment within those periods, changes from 44 in Phase 1 to 49 in Phase 2 and 33 in Phase 3. The higher number in Phase 2 may simply reflect the greater time available. The smaller number of entries in Phase 3 may perhaps reflect a greater degree of efficiency or simply pressure of work as Miad was working towards more than one BA assessment at the time.

Two qualities noted in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 were a very high degree of both recursivity and interactivity in her approach to the four core cognitive-rhetorical problems of the assignment: constructing an understanding of the rubric, constructing a conceptual framework, constructing the practical application and constructing the report. Phase 3 seems to have been slightly different: there are longer stretches devoted to a single problem and both log and interview data indicate a much less recursive approach to at least some of the problems, most clearly the construction of the report. It is not clear from Phase 3 log or interview data why Phase 3 might have been different but it is clear from the Phase 1 and Phase 2 data sources that factors tending towards recursivity and interactivity in those phases were Miad's unfamiliarity with the assignment genre and thus her need to continually explore the literature for genre-exemplars (Phase 1) and the practical difficulties she had with concepts relevant to her materials design and analysis (Phase 2) which again necessitated a shuttling back and forth between literature and pedagogic material and report. It may be that in Phase 3 Miad encountered fewer problems and so was able to work without undue recursivity or interactivity.

5.2 What patterns of strategic interaction emerged over the course of the year?

The three phases of data-collection reveal that Miad engaged in a wide range of textual and interpersonal interactions in order to complete her assignments. Her textual interactions included: interactions with rubrics: she analyzed rubrics by looking at key-words and unpacked the rubrics into sub-questions; interactions with planning instruments of various kinds: she outlined repeatedly and in detail assisted by wall-charts and schedules which she used to set targets and monitor progress; with literature both on and off the modular reading lists, accessed from the library or through the internet, which she used not just for their content but

which she also 'mined' for genre information; with non-academic genre texts such as newspaper reports, which she also used to analyse discourse structure; with an assignment made available by the University, which she analysed with regard to genre features; with academic skills training materials, which she used to learn about genre and process; with university assessment criteria, which she used to assess marker expectations and to self-assess her own work; with her own teaching materials (her textbooks), which she used to generate ideas; with modular lecture/seminar notes and materials and with lecture/seminar notes and materials from other modules, between which she attempted to construct thematic and conceptual links; with her own text-in-progress, which she outlined, drafted and proofread in the recursive and interactive manner noted above; with her own previously written assignment texts which she used to try to establish conceptual links with her later assignments; with marker feedback on her first assignment, which she used to identify marker expectations for later assignments.

Her interpersonal interactions included: interactions with a tutor and her undergraduate colleagues in lectures or seminars during both the intensive courses (Winter and Summer Schools) and the extensive course (Day Release), during which she used questions to elicit and note down assignment-related information and frequently to confirm/disconfirm her own hypotheses; individual interactions with her RT, which were usually face-to-face but occasionally over the phone or through email and in which she adopted a highly pro-active approach to the interactions; interactions with undergraduate colleagues from her own regional group, though these were rarely initiated by her, which she used to clarify her own ideas about assignments by explaining them to others; with undergraduate colleagues from other regional groups, whom she contacted to gain a different perspective or to obtain a book unavailable in her region; with the participants in her assignment-related research; with her teacher and administrator colleagues in her professional context; with graduate friends from whom she sought advice about reading and how to write assignments; and with members of her family, with whom she negotiated both work-space and work-time at home.

The data actually indicates no striking changes in the patterns of interaction over the course of the year. The incidence of interpersonal interactions rose in Phase 2 but this may be accounted for, firstly, by the contextual reason that the rubric obliged Miad to involve another person in the process to teach an observed lesson and Miad had to approach a number of different teacher colleagues to arrange this and, secondly, that there was a series of interactions with other colleagues in her regional group who approached her for help in explaining key concepts and advice on the design of the pedagogic materials. These interactions were all initiated by colleagues and seem to have ceased completely in Phase 3. The majority of interpersonal interactions in all three phases were with her tutor in seminars or individual tutorials, though these too declined sharply in Phase 3. The most significant changes seem to be in the range of her textual interactions. In Phase 1 her interactions were with the rubric, assessment criteria, library sources, the modular materials, internet sources, academic skills material, her pedagogic

material and textbooks, report planning texts such as outlines and her own text-in-progress. Phase 2 included all of these, apart from internet sources, and interactions with materials from two other modules, with the text of her first assignment and with marker feedback on that text. In part this may reflect the simple contextual factor that having completed one assignment already a greater range of textual material was available. However it may also have reflected strategic choices. Phase 3 also included most of these. Perhaps the most significant textual development was Miad's interaction with planning texts of various kinds: schedules, deadline lists, outlines and posters. The range of planning texts and the extent of Miad's interactions with them seem to have increased over the three phases: In Phase 1 Miad engaged in rigorous planning of her assignment text through outlining but did not address the assignment overall. In Phases 2 and 3 she continued to plan the report in detail (and to such a degree that she was able in Phase 3 to write one main draft only) but she also began to think about planning the overall process and both made and interacted with schedules of various kinds.

5.3   What factors did Miad indicate facilitated her completion of the assignments?

The range of factors identified by Miad as contributing to her successful completion of the assignments is also wide and includes very many of the interactions noted above: careful analysis of the rubric; planning through outlining and making wall-posters; creating and monitoring schedules; drafting; reviewing modular materials; reviewing other modular materials to revise key ideas or to make links; explorations of academic genre texts; reviewing academic skills training materials; exploring non-academic genres (e.g. journalistic) to explore text structure; reading the literature both for content and for genre-exemplification; studying a sample assignment (a genre-exemplar) provided by the university; reviewing her previous completed assignment texts; studying the feedback she received from the university on her first assignment; participating in lectures and seminars; discussing individually with her tutor; discussing with her undergraduate colleagues both from her own regional group and from others. In Phase 1 two types of interaction appear to have been particularly significant: Miad's interactions with her tutor and her own 'mining' of the modular literature and academic skills training materials to construct an understanding of stages of the assignment genre. In Phase 2 Miad drew on these sources of support again but also appears to have benefited from the experience of Phase 1 in a number of ways: she had a completed assignment text plus feedback to use as guidance, a broader range of modular material to draw on, a base of understanding drawn from her reading in the first phase and a certain level of understanding of the assignment genre. By Phase 3 Miad appears to have reached a degree of independence. She refers to tutor explanations and materials in clarifying both the rubric and the nature of the analysis required for her assignment and briefly to one piece of advice from a colleague but apart from those the experience of the two previous assignments appears to have been enough to carry her through.

6   DISCUSSION

The variety of textual interactions involved in Miad's development supports the findings of very many of the studies mentioned above. The way Miad actively sought out and 'mined' genre and non-genre texts mirrors the findings of Riazi (1997), Ivanic (1998), Angelova & Riazantseva (1999) and Tardy (2005); the way she used and drew on her own earlier work echoes Casanave (1995), and Dong (1996), the way she used assignment rubrics echoes both Angelova & Riazantseva (1999) and Riazi (1997), the way she used session notes echoes Casanave (1995) and Riazi (1997) and her use of academic skills materials echoes Dong (1996). 'There are also similarities with the participants in Riazi (1997) in the way Miad learned about the assignment genre through trying to use it in order to express her own meanings.

The significant role played by her interpersonal interactions also mirrors similar findings in the literature. Interactions with peers do not seem to have been as important for Miad as for the participants in the studies by Casanave (1995), Connor & Mayberry (1996), Angelova & Riazantseva (1999) though it should be noted that, even though she did not seek out interactions with her peers, she clearly benefited from the opportunity to rehearse and clarify her own thoughts through explaining them to others. Possibly of greater importance for Miad were her interactions, both oral and written, with her tutor and with her tutors and colleagues in class. The importance of the class interactions for clarifying the demands of specific assignment tasks and for facilitating investigation of the assignment genre and the importance of her individual oral and written interactions with her tutor and the close scaffolding of her writing facilitated by them echo the findings of many other studies, especially Casanave (1995), Riazi (1997), Spack (1997), Flowerdew (2000), Tardy (2005) and Gentil (2005). It is hard to assess the impact of mentoring style on the interactions. Miad adopted a highly pro-active approach to interactions with her tutor and did not depend on him to initiate comments. The tutor was happy to participate on this basis. It is unclear how the interactions might have been affected if the tutor had tried to adopt a more directive approach.

Miad's approach to completing her assignments confirms the widely presented picture of successful writing as a highly recursive and interactive process, (e.g. Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) though it is interesting that as Miad gained greater understanding of the genre and perhaps of her subject matter her process became less interactive i.e. she tended to focus on each of the core cognitive-rhetorical problems more sequentially. Equally, it is clear that Miad's processes demonstrate an increasing degree of planning not just of the assignment text but of the whole process and show a greater range of planning devices.

7   CONCLUSION

The case-study affirms Riazi's (1997) socio-cognitive view of literacy-acquisition and has a number of implications. For students, the study suggests that a pro-active approach to exploiting whatever human or textual resources come to hand, in order to investigate genre, accompanied by a willingness to plan may contribute to success. For EAP tutors, the study suggests the importance of individual discussion

of genre and of the close scaffolding of a student's attempts to produce genre texts. Interaction between tutor and student at every stage of the assignment process appears to have been crucial in this study and this may well be a finding with wider implications.

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