Developing discipline-specific academic writing skills of Hong Kong ESL learners

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Abstract: In this paper, we shall explore academic writing in the framework of academic literacy development among Hong Kong university ESL learners of language and education programs. We shall also discuss discipline-specific academic writing in terms of the continuum comprising academic writing in science, social science and humanities and the implications for developing academic writing skills of Hong Kong ESL learners. In particular, we shall discuss in detail a number of issues regarding academic writing in the disciplines of language and education.

Key words: Academic writing, disciplinary knowledge, academic literacy, community of practice, language and education, Hong Kong ESL learners

1. Academic writing as new ways of knowing

When secondary students start their tertiary education, they usually face new challenges, including adapting to the new environments, meeting new classmates, lecturers and professors, and making new friends. This process may also involve adapting to new linguistic and cultural practices if they choose to have their tertiary education in a new place. After a few weeks or months of orientation, they may discover that the new challenges increasingly center on an ongoing requirement of academic reading and writing.

Academic reading and writing for fresh university students are usually regarded as 'academic literacy practices', which involve 'new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge' (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 32). These academic literacy practices are highly likely to take place within disciplines, and they constitute 'central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study' (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 32).

Learning in universities is always challenging because university students are often faced with situations where they are required to write on certain subject matters, however, they are not provided with sufficient input or guidance on what to write and how to write in an academic writing style that they are yet to acquire. What is deemed to be common-sense knowledge by the lecturers may not be so common-sense to fresh university students, for example, the choice of words and phrases (*currently* vs. *nowadays*; *I'd like to talk about* vs. *I shall discuss*), in-text citations, and arranging references in alphabetical order if the chosen referencing style is APA.

According to Hyland (2000, p. 147) 'while it may seem self-evident to faculty what writing at the university entails, this is rarely explicitly conveyed to students.' Coffin et al. (2003, p. 3) hold a similar view arguing that 'student academic writing continues to be at the centre of teaching and learning in higher education, but is often an invisible dimension of the curriculum; that is, the rules or conventions governing what counts as academic writing are often assumed to

be part of the common sense knowledge students have, and are thus not explicitly taught within disciplinary courses.'

However, university students are assessed largely by what they write, and they need to learn both general academic conventions as well as disciplinary writing requirements in order to be successful in higher education. In essence, university studies primarily center on 'writing to learn' and 'learning to write'. In universities, 'writing is used as a means to help students acquire content knowledge and to meet the pedagogical needs of content area professors and programs' (Zhu, 2004, p. 43). 'Learning to write' is an equally important matter for university students, because success in tertiary education depends largely on the competence of academic reading and writing.

2. Academic writing as literacy development

It is useful to view the competence of academic reading and writing in the framework of academic literacy development. Fox (1999, p. 25) defines *literacy* as 'the ability to make meaning with written language in a particular group or community that prizes that ability.' Here, 'a particular group or community' is a very important concept, because it entails a context for academic reading and writing. According to Lea & Street (2000, p. 33), 'viewing literacy from a cultural and social practice approach, rather than in terms of educational judgments about good and bad writing, and approaching meanings as contested can give us insights into the nature of academic literacy in particular and academic learning in general'.

> The term literacy itself draws attention to the relative nature of academic writing, encompassing as it does the wide range of experiences, practices and ways of knowing that individuals carry to a writing task. 'Literacy' refers to different strategies for conceptualizing, organizing and producing texts; it implies variations in the contexts and communities in which they are written, and the roles of reader and writer that they invoke (Hyland, 2000, p. 146).

In contrast with academic literacy, there also exists a notion of academic 'illiteracy'. Factors that contribute to academic 'illiteracy' as identified by political science professors include 'lack of disciplinary schemata; weakness in identifying the larger purposes of texts; little planning when reading and producing texts; inability to connect concepts with examples or facts; limited disciplinary vocabulary; and 'unwillingness' on the part of the students to be objective when approaching texts or topics representing conflicting values or beliefs.' (Zhu, 2004, p. 32)

3. Academic writing in context: a community of practice

Based on the above definitions of academic literacy, we understand that it is important to contextualize academic literacy development process in discipline-specific 'community' terms. 'Communities have different ideas about what is worth communicating, how it can be communicated, what readers are likely to know, how they might be persuaded, and so on.' (Hyland, 2008, p. 549) If we take a university as a community, faculties as comprising interrelated disciplines, and departments as providers of courses or modules, we will then be able to view the writing tasks in the framework of a community. What is more important is that, at the very centre of the community, there lies the core element of 'writing task'-based student-

lecturer interaction. It is through this 'interaction' that effective learning and teaching are likely to take place.

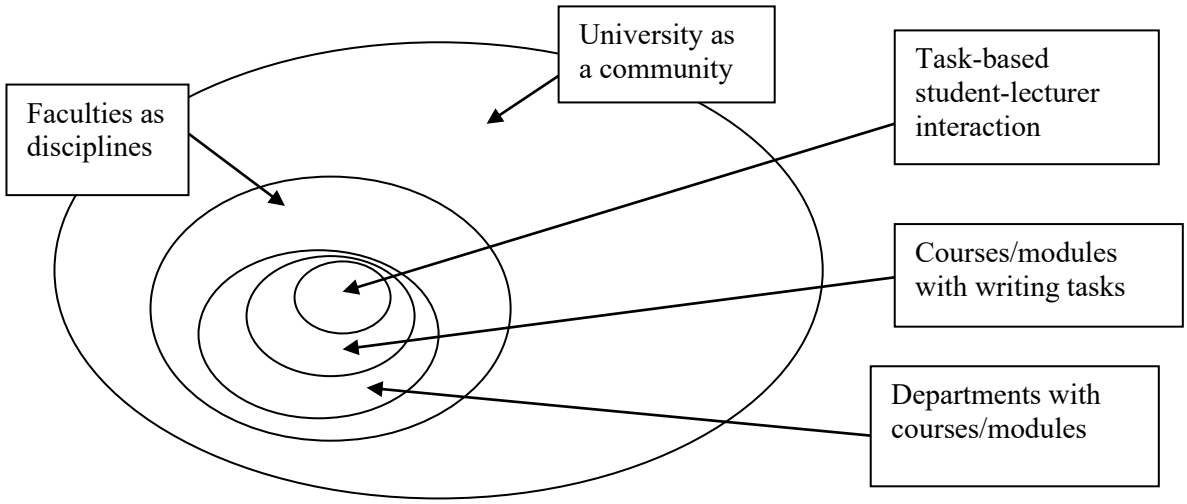

Figure 1: Academic writing as a community of practice

Another importance of viewing the academic writing of university students in 'community' terms is that it makes us aware that new university students may come from a different 'community', where literacy-and-numeracy based, achievement-test oriented educational systems prevail. This may help both university students and lecturers understand that the university community requires a new type of literacy, i.e. academic literacy, including a sense of research community, communication through academic reading and writing, learning beyond the classroom, e.g. field work for social sciences, library skills for humanities and laboratory work for sciences.

4. Academic writing 'gaps' between secondary and tertiary education

It is not surprising for university students to feel challenged when they start their tertiary education in terms of their writing requirements, because the 'gaps' between the writing requirements for secondary school graduates and first year university students are considerably wide. The following are examples of the writing tasks (HKALE English writing task, and HKIEd module writing task for year one students).

Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (AS Use of English)

Writing: (1 hour and 15 minutes)
It is suggested that you spend some of the time on planning and proofreading.
Write about 500 words on the following topic.

A Hong Kong radio station has recently started a program to help young people solve their emotional problems. You called the radio program host, Ms Wong, to tell her about a serious interpersonal problem that had been troubling you a lot. She offered you some advice, which you followed, but the outcome turned out to be disastrous.

Based on this experience, write a letter to the Editor of a youth magazine questioning the quality of the advice offered by radio program hosts who do not have professional qualifications in counseling. Share your views about the usefulness and dangers of such programs. Suggest ways in which young people can get good advice. Sign your letter 'Chris Wong'.

Hong Kong Institute of Education (BEd program) Year 1
Module: Introduction to Language Studies
Student-Authored Wikibook Group Project

Task description:
In this task, you will work in groups of 3 or 4, and each group member will contribute (1000 words) to a chapter of a student-authored academic book 'Introduction to Language Studies' based on the topics introduced in this module (including 'nature of language', 'structural grammar', 'functional grammar', 'speech and writing', 'pragmatics', 'discourse analysis', 'conversation analysis', and 'world Englishes').

Peer editing among group members will be required and members in the same group will receive the same group grade. A draft of your group chapter must be posted on the Wetpaint Wikibook website online according to schedule.

Group members must peer edit each other's section in the corresponding chapter of the book so as to help ensure that each section includes sufficient detail, that the writing is polished, and that the whole chapter is coherent (the content of each section links together logically and smoothly).

The above tasks show the differences in the writing requirements for secondary school graduates and first year university students. The differences can be summarized in the table below:

Table 1: Differences in the writing requirements for secondary school graduates and first year university students

	HKALE	**HKIEd (Year 1) Course (two tasks)**
Number of words	500	1000 + 1000 (3000-4000 for a group)
Time duration	1 hour 15 minutes	within 10 weeks
Individual/collaborative writing	Individual	individual/collaborative
Referencing	no, or implicit	explicit
Writing style	non- or semi-academic	academic
Discipline areas	General	specific

Product/Process orientation	product oriented	process oriented

In addition, there are also regional differences and course variations in terms of writing requirements for secondary school graduates and university students. While secondary school students are required to write 500 words in the writing task of their HKALE examination, university students are expected to complete academic writing tasks with words ranging from 800 to 3000 on average for each individual writing task. Apart from the word limit requirement, there are also observable differences in terms of time duration, individual/collaborative writing, referencing, writing style, discipline areas, and product/process orientation.

5. Academic writing variations across the curriculum

Even within tertiary education, variations exist within disciplines and across the curriculum.

> Assessment practices vary across subjects and academic areas, as well as between individual lecturers, and requirements are not always made clear to students. Miscommunication between students and lecturers can result from factors including students' unfamiliarity with the conventions of academic assessment; their experiences of differing assessment practices between courses and between lecturers; differing cultural expectations; and differing language backgrounds (Coffin et al., 2003, p. 16).

'Writing is a practice based on expectations. The process of writing involves creating a text that the writer assumes the reader will recognize and expect.' (Hyland, 2008, p. 544) When secondary school graduates first enter universities, they may not be aware that they have entered a 'new' community, and that they are faced with new expectations, from general literacy to academic literacy. Therefore, a number of students may experience certain degrees of 'literacy' shock. A case in point is that a year one student, having just finished an associate degree, and feeling confident about her writing skills, strongly disagreed with her university lecturer as far as the low grade she received for her first university writing assignment, in which, she cited a number of other scholars' works without any explicit in-text referencing. She argued that she provided a reference list at the end of her essay, however, the lecturer pointed out that it could have been regarded as plagiarized writing if it was without in-text referencing to the ideas or words of other researchers.

Considering the 'gaps' in writing requirements between secondary schools and universities, Fox (1999, p. 26) has proposed a number of 'principles' for university students and lecturers in terms of improving the students 'academic literacy': 1) the previous language experiences (literacy skills) of beginning university students can serve as 'workable starting points' for academic literacy development; 2) lecturers can help students 'improve their ability to use conventional forms of written English without students feeling that they must devalue or discard their written idiolects, dialects, or native languages'; 3) university lecturers can help 'initiate students into the academic discourse community'; 4) university lecturers can help students 'develop a sense of writing as a process, … and some strategies for making those processes work better for them in academic and other public settings'; and 5) university lecturers and students can 'learn to work collaboratively, to see academic and public discourse as sites for communal activity'.

These principles are important in the sense that they help the university lecturers and students to be aware of their respective roles and the specific contexts they are in, in terms of upgrading the students' literacy skills to academic literacy competence.

6. Discipline-specific academic writing in language and education

It is important to be aware that academic writing, unlike other genres of writing, is highly discipline-specific. University students entering specific disciplines need a specialized literacy, i.e. a discipline-specific way of acquiring new knowledge, because academic knowledge varies in nature across the continuum among sciences, social sciences and humanities. It is useful for the humanities students and lecturers to be aware that the knowledge across the disciplines in humanities is explicitly interpretive, dispersed, qualitative, and it has a fluid discourse and varied readership, while the knowledge in other disciplines can be different in nature.

> In the sciences, new knowledge is accepted by experimental proof. Science writing reinforces this by highlighting a gap in knowledge, presenting a hypothesis related to this gap, and then reporting experimental findings to support this. The humanities, on the other hand, rely on case studies and narratives while claims are accepted on strength of argument. The social sciences fall between these extremes. While they have partly adopted methods of the sciences, in applying these to human data they have to give more attention to explicit interpretation (Hyland, 2008, p. 550).

The types of written texts across disciplines also vary, because of the different nature of the discipline-specific knowledge. It can be noted that in Humanities and Arts disciplines, the major text types include 'essays, critical analysis, translations, and projects'. As far as academic writing tasks across the disciplines are concerned, Horowitz (cited in Cooper & Bikowski, 2007, pp. 208-209) categorized seven types of writing tasks. These including (in decreasing order of frequency): synthesis of multiple sources, connection of theory and data, report on a specified participatory experience, summary, research project, case study, and annotated bibliography.

According to Cooper & Bikowski (2007, p. 209), 'across disciplines and levels (graduate and undergraduate), essays and short tasks were the most common assignments. Library research papers and reports on experiments/observations were also common across the board while other tasks were only found sparingly.' Academic writing involves specific disciplinary knowledge, and generic reading, writing, and research skills. As far as the disciplines of language and education are concerned, in addition to a sound understanding of the disciplinary knowledge, certain skills are highly desirable, including the library skills, collaborative working skills, appropriate communication skills with the peers and lecturers, and critical thinking skills. These are essential elements for academic literacy development. Through integrating authentic academic writing tasks embedded in the courses within and across disciplines, the students not only write to learn, but also learn to write.

To train students as future professionals in particular disciplines or as members of a particular academic community is an important notion, because this may help university students and lectures to increase the awareness that academic writing is not just for the sake of assessment, but it is an aid to critical thinking and understanding, and it extends students' learning beyond

lectures and other formal meetings (Coffin et al., 2003, p. 20). In addition, it improves the communication skills of the students and the lecturers within or across the disciplinary community, and more importantly, it accumulates academic credentials for the forward and upward professional mobility of the students.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, we take academic writing as new ways of knowing in tertiary education. We have discussed academic writing in the framework of academic literacy development. We have also contextualized academic writing as a community of practice. We argue that it is important to be aware of the gaps between writing and academic writing (literacy versus academic literacy) requirements for secondary school graduates and university students. At the end of the paper, we have explored issues of discipline-specific academic writing with particular reference to the disciplines of language and education for ESL learners in Hong Kong.

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