TEACHING ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

by Anna Wing-bo Tso and Winnie Siu-yee Ho

Anna Wing-bo Tso received her PhD in Applied Linguistics from The University of Birmingham, U.K. She is associate professor of English and Comparative Literature at The Open University of Hong Kong, where she directs the Digital Humanities Research Centre and heads the Master of Arts in Applied English Linguistics. Her most recent books include *Teaching Shakespeare to ESL Students* (Springer, 2017) and *Academic Writing for Arts and Humanities Students* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2016).

Winnie Siu-yee Ho obtained her PhD in Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University, U.K. She has been teaching Linguistics and English for Specific and Academic Purposes courses to undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Hong Kong, the Open University of Hong Kong and Chu Hai College of Higher Education.

Abstract

Academic language is classroom-specific language all students must comprehend and use to achieve academic success (Cummins, 1980). Starting as early as the primary grades, students around the world are expected to learn how to use language in academic settings. In the elementary grades, "written essays in persuasive or analytic genres are often graded using criteria that refer implicitly to academic-language forms" (Snow and Uccelli, 2009, p. 112). When learners reach the pre-university level, academic writing, in particular English academic writing, becomes more important than ever.

Across all cultures, English academic writing is taught in high schools and institutions in the tertiary sector. Yet, recent studies on academic English writing and learners' literacies, including Flowerdew and Miller (2008), Grabe (2001), Hyland (2003) and Prior (2006), have criticized generic writing courses for ignoring socio-cultural contexts and individual learners' needs and motivation, let alone the variation of writing tasks in different disciplines. Our research indicates that students need more than just grammatical knowledge and mechanical skills training (Tso and Chung, 2016). The development of academic literacy, now an increasingly popular area of study, comes under the spotlight. Having over ten years of experience teaching English as a second language (ESL), we will overview the current pedagogical approaches for teaching academic writing to ESL students, a fast-growing population all over the world owing to globalization. We will also share teaching materials we have designed based on our understanding of academic literacies.

Introduction

Whether in ESL or other school contexts, the ability to articulate ideas clearly and convincingly is crucial to academic studies. It is commonly known that students who excel at academic writing are likely to perform well in their studies and become successful students. In light of this, most high schools, community colleges, and universities run compulsory pre-university and/or year-one English academic writing courses to improve the academic writing ability of their students. According to Hamilton (2000), academic literacies are closely associated with dominant literacies, which are highly valued and standardized literacies with controlled knowledge and bounded communities of practice. They are found in authoritative institutional settings, such as government, schools, and workplaces. Within these formal social institutions, norms and regulations exist to govern the behaviour of citizens, students, and staff members, respectively.

It is difficult to teach academic literacies in the classroom setting. The crux of the matter is that many students, parents, and even teachers believe English language proficiency simply means academic writing skills, and many have mistakenly equated academic writing skills with academic literacies. However, Bhatia (2004, p.144) explains that there are in fact three levels of discursive competence:

Textual competence refers to the ability to both master language (i.e. sounds, words, grammar, word meanings, discourse) and to use textual, contextual, and pragmatic knowledge to construct and interpret texts.

Generic competence is the ability to respond to recurrent and new communicative situations by producing, interpreting, and use generic conventions in the disciplines.

Social competence refers to the ability to use language more widely to participate effectively in a wide variety of social and institutional contexts to give expression to their social identity.

Simply put, at the textual competence level, the focus is on linguistic accuracy; while, at the generic competence level, the focus is no longer on grammar and vocabulary, but on academic skills including: (a) Using academic conventions, (b) Referring to sources, (c) Quoting and paraphrasing, (d) Note-taking and summarizing, (e) Planning, drafting and editing, (f) Writing clear and well-structured paragraphs, (g) Improving text organization, (h) Ensuring that texts 'flow,' and (i) Improving grammar and accuracy.

A student with good English language proficiency (i.e. textual competence) may not have a mastery of academic writing skills, or what Bhatia calls "generic competence". Likewise, a student with excellent English and academic writing skills can lack the social competence required by a specific discipline, such as English for Law or English for Science.

New Literacy Studies

Social competence, or more specifically, academic literacies, is beyond reading and writing. It is a set of situated practices. Traditionally, the definition of 'literacy' concerns "people's ability to read and write particular forms of texts" (Ivanic, Edwards, Barton, Martin-Jones, Fowler, Hughes, Mannion, Miller, Satchwell & Smith, 2009, p.19). However, literacy is no longer limited to reading and writing. Within the tradition of New Literacy Studies (NLS), a term coined by Gee (1990), Street (1984) rejects the argument that literacy is a set of discrete skills and emphasizes the importance of context. Lankshear (1999) also disagrees with the traditional view of skills-based literacy and proposes a sociocultural approach to literacy. In other words, in addition to linguistic competence and

academic skills, teachers and students should also pay special attention to literary practices.

Literacy Practices

Literacy practices are common patterns found in reading and writing texts for social activities, cultural values, and ideological purposes. Street (1995) further reinforces the importance of the social nature of literacy and the multiple characters of literacy practices by coining the term "Social Literacies" (p. 2). Literacy practices are "regularly occurring ways of doing things with texts" (Ivanic et al., 2009, p.21). They are also "general cultural ways of using reading and writing" (Barton, 2012, p.1) "which people draw upon in particular situations" (Barton, 2001, p.96).

What is at issue for academic writing training in ESL classrooms and beyond is that learners need academic socialization where they improve their English proficiency and become familiarized with the academic skills, writing style, and conventions.

Our Case Study at The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK)

OUHK is a typical Asian university that provides programs for both local and international students. A case study at the OUHK both sheds light on how literacy practices of students and gives insights into the teaching of English academic writing in ESL classrooms and beyond. Through the OUHK academic writing class's student questionnaire survey, written assignments, and external examiner's comments, our study reveals that few ESL students managed to attain a high level of English proficiency. Multiple grammatical mistakes such as fragments and run-on sentences can often be spotted in students' written assignments. Here is a typical example:

> 2. According to de Beauvoir, <u>female has reproductive organs, is not enough to be a women,</u> <u>when female are growing up, they have to learn how to be a quality women through education,</u> <u>religious and culture.</u>
>
> **Major problems**: <u>run-on (comma splices – multiple ideas joined wrongly by commas),</u> <u>subject-verb disagreement, wrong part of speech (e.g. religious).</u>

Such grammatical and vocabulary mistakes reveal that some academic writing class students have weak English foundations and need more exposure to the academic texts. Similarly, the external examiner (a professor working for the Department of English at another university in Hong Kong) made the following comment in the end-of-course report:

> **External Examiner's Report**
>
> **ENGLA101F**
> **University English Writing Skills**
>
> **Overall performance of the students, their strengths and weaknesses**
> The performance of the students was very satisfactory across the assessments reviewed. This is a key course for students to master because the skills covered are essential across the whole curriculum. The assignments were well-written and handled well by the students overall. A recurrent problem was failing to fully observe academic in-text and end-of-text referencing conventions.
>
> **Recommendations for course improvements in curriculum, syllabus, delivery methods and resources**
> Perhaps even more time needs to be devoted to teaching the students how to fully observe referencing conventions.

The external examiner's professional advice further affirms that students, especially ESL students, should learn to observe the academic writing style and conventions.

Corpus-based Teaching Materials

With a view to helping students improve their academic English proficiency and academic literacies, we designed a series of corpus-based teaching toolkits tailored for arts and social sciences students, be they EFL, ESL or native English students. For example, we show the following concordance lines to highlight the difference between 'interrelationship' and 'relationship', two commonly confused words in the academic discourse (Tso, Ho and Chung, 2016, p. 102):

1. … explores the *interrelationship* between the ethical issue and policy.

2. The *interrelationship* between pain and anxiety is…

3. The role of *interrelationship* among peoples, nations, and cultures…

4. …investigate the *interrelationship* among these issues.

    1. There is a positive *relationship* between weather and ecosystem.

    2. … a significant debate about the *relationship* of eye movements to dyslexia in the reading.

    3. a long-term committed marital *relationship* is a good thing for society.

    4. … a significant component of her *relationship* with the other classmates.

Source: Adapted from Corpus of contemporary American English

Exercise One. Study the concordance lines in the following and answer questions 1-2.

1.   What are the parts of speech and words used after 'interrelationship' and 'relationship'?
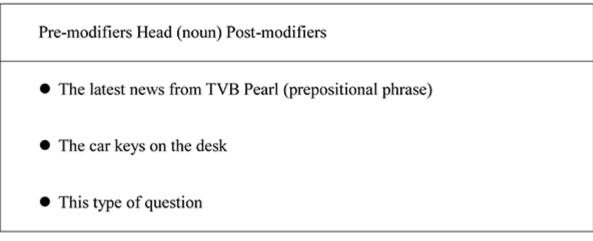
2. Based on the above, define the meanings of the words –interrelationship and relationship.

Authentic Text-based Teaching Materials

To draw students' attention to the common sentence structures in academic writing, we also write simple notes and design authentic text-based exercises in the learning kit (Tso, Ho and Chung, 2016, p. 123):

Prepositional phrases as the post-modifiers of nouns

Complex noun phrases are common in the written registers. They are formed because of pre-modifiers and post-modifiers.

Pre-modifiers Head (noun) Post-modifiers
● The latest news from TVB Pearl (prepositional phrase)   ● The car keys on the desk   ● This type of question

To most learners, pre-modifiers of nouns are comparatively less difficult than post-modifiers. Learners need to pay attention to <u>post-modification by prepositional phrases</u>, which are the major type of post-modifiers of nouns in academic writings. The post-modifying prepositional phrases begin with a preposition and give more information about the nouns.

Exercise One. Read the paragraph below and answer the following questions.

Assessment in Hong Kong

In our traditional Chinese culture, there is the widespread dominance of the exam-oriented curriculum with limited student engagement in learning. Learners become spoon fed by teachers and rote learning is the norm in educational settings. Also, the summative assessment based on norm referencing means that students' academic results merely conform to a preset distribution, without any indication of how much progress they have made. After all, this type of assessment is an oversimplification of teaching- and-learning (Richards, 2013). Also, giving marks at the end of schooling is overemphasized while the giving of advice and learning opportunities are neglected (Black, 2006).
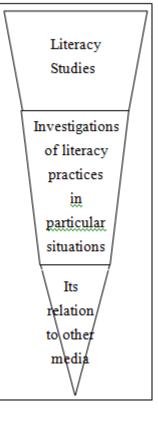
1. Find out nouns with prepositional phrases (Give at least three examples).
2. Explain the function of prepositional phrases.
3. Write down nouns with prepositional phrases (3 examples) in your discipline and share them with your partner.

Contextual Content-based Teaching Materials

In addition, contextual content-based texts have also been used to illustrate academic essay structure and organization. For instance, when teaching students methods of writing a good introduction, we show various annotated introductions excerpted from authentic academic texts (Tso, Ho and Chung, 2016, p. 85-6):

Method 1: Begin with a broad, general statement of your topic and narrow it down to your thesis statement (Extract adapted from Barton (2001))

The field of *Literacy Studies* is now a substantial area of research. It is broad enough for there to be various disputes and unresolved issues within the field and there have been different traditions of research. My own work has been within one particular strand of Literacy Studies research; that of detailed *investigations of literacy practices in particular situations*. Literacy studies is broader; there are other studies with more interest in textual analysis, in other media, in critical theory and with stronger relations to policy and practice. Part of the coming of age of the field is the existence of different strands and discussions, disagreements and unconcluded business, as well as interest, support and attacks from beyond the field. Various issues have arisen from research such as ours, including *its relation to other media,* the limits of what can be called literacy, what is meant by practices, the relation of texts and practices, the importance of the materiality of texts. These form the basis for the ensuing discussion.

Literacy Studies

Investigations of literacy practices in particular situations

Its relation to other media

Method 2: Start with an idea or a situation that is the opposite of the one you will develop (Extract adapted from Lee (2011))

These are some of the titles of public, shared-interest "groups" on the social network site, Facebook. What is interesting about these titles is that such accusations concerning poor literacy skills have been with us for over a decade, especially in English-speaking contexts (see, for example, the media reports discussed in Thurlow, 2007, 2011). The negative correlation between technologies and people's lives has spread crossculturally; for example, it has been reported that young children in Hong Kong who spend more than an hour a day on texting, instant messaging, discussion forums, and blogs have lower reading skills in both Chinese and English (Singtao Daily , 2008). Needless to say, what is missing in reports like this and public discussions is how new media and their associated practices are already deeply embedded in people's everyday lives, and, in the case of students, their out-of-school lives. An important characteristic of new media is that, despite their multimodal and multimedia possibilities, they still involve extensive use of the written word. In fact, a growing body of research now shows that *young people's new media use may actually enhance their standard language practices (e.g., Plester & Wood, 2009; Plester et al., 2008). It is this interplay between conventional literacy and so-called "new literacies"* that is the focus of my chapter.	The idea which is opposite to the main idea The main idea you are going to develop in the main body

Introductions with contents about literacies are deliberately chosen to give students a better contextual view of their own academic literacy development.

Conclusion

According to the findings of our small case study, students' performance in academic writing has steadily improved since teachers of the writing class started using the specially designed corpus-based, authentic text-based and contextual content-based learning and teaching materials mentioned above. Indeed, English language proficiency, academic writing skills, and academic literacies are equally important for good academic writing at the pre-university and university levels. For better socialization into the academic writing discourse, starting from grade 12 onwards, teachers of academic writing are advised to provide students with more situated practices relevant to academic writing.

Acknowledgement

References

Barton, D. (2001). Directions for literacy research: Analysing language and social practices in a textually mediated world. *Language and Education*, *15*(2-3), 92-104. doi:10.1080/09500780108666803

Barton, D. (2012). Ethnographic approaches to literacy research. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Wiley-Blackwell. doi:10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0398

Bhatia, V.K. (2004). *Worlds of written discourse*. London: Continuum.

Cummins, J. (1980). The construct of language proficiency in bilingual education. In J. E. Alastis (Ed.). *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1980*. Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press.

Flowerdew, J., & Miller, L. (2008). Social structure and individual agency in second language learning: evidence from three life histories. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *5*(4), 201-224.

Gee, J. P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies.* London: Taylor & Francis.

Grabe, W. (2001). Notes toward a theory of second language writing. In Silva, T. and Matsuda, P.K. (Eds.) *On second language writing*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum associates, pp. 39-58.

Hamilton, M. (2000). Expanding the new literacy studies: using photographs to explore literacy as social practice. In D. Barton, M, Hamilton & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 16-34). Psychology Press.

Hyland, K. (2003). Genre-based pedagogies: A social response to process. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *12*(1), 17-29.

Ivanic, R., Edwards, R., Barton, D., Martin-Jones, M., Fowler, Z., Hughes, B., Mannion, G., Miller, K., Satchwell, C., & Smith, J. (2009). *Improving learning in college: Rethinking literacies across the curriculum.* London: Routledge.

Lankshear, C. (1999). Literacy studies in education: Disciplined developments in a post-disciplinary age. *After the disciplines*, 199-228.

Prior, P. (2006). A sociocultural theory of writing. In C.A MacArthur, S. Graham and J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research*. New York: Guilford Press, pp. 54-66.

Snow, C. E. and Uccelli, P. The challenge of academic language. In D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of literacy.* New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 112-133.

Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Street, B. V. (1995). *Social literacies: critical approaches to literacy development, ethnography, and education*. London: Longman.

Street, B. V. (2004). *Understanding and defining literacy scoping paper for EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006*. Paris: UNESCO.

Tso, W. B. and Chung, S. K. (2016). Academic Literacy Development: University Students' Perceptions and Experiences of English Academic Writing in Southeast Asia. *Pacific-Asian Education. 28*(1), 51-61.

Tso, W. B., Ho, S. Y. and Chung, S. K. (2016). *Academic Writing for Arts and Humanities Students*. Singapore: McGraw-Hill Education.