Influences on the development of tertiary academic writing in international students: teaching to the unknown

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Small study carried out in an Australian university which is a relative ‘newcomer’ to the international student scene. Entry is IELTS 6 for UG and 6.5 for PG.

The study sought to test the hypothesis that there is a mismatch between these students’ prior academic literacies practices and what is required of them on arrival in Australian university degree programs.
The Study

1. Small case study
   - Focus: 12 IS from ISC (Nepal, India, Bangladesh) in Business degree programs – 7x UG x 5 PG

2. Data collection
   - Short survey and in-depth interviews/focus groups (to gather student experiences)
   - Subject outlines (to assess AL requirements)

3. Analysis
   - Constant comparison coding and textual analysis

4. Main focus:
   - Assessment literacies and writing
Theoretical Framing

• Academic literacies frame influenced by Bourdieu’s notions of field, habitus and capital (Wingate, 2012; Thomas, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984) sympathetic to our concerns to investigate students’ prior experiences of learning plus their home familial/educational contexts
Method

We triangulated

- Interviews/focus groups (student prior educational experiences)
- Survey data (student home country familial and schooling demographics)
- Document analysis (Australian degree assessment tasks)
Findings

1. Assessment

2. Academic writing

3. Academic reading
Findings: Assessment – Home Country

Dominant mode of assessment / AL = rote learning and accurate reproduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment experiences (Writing)</th>
<th>Prevalence out of 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summative: Exam as only measure of learning</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formative: some had experience of ad hoc testing in class</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No continuous assessment</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No take home writing assessment tasks</td>
<td>10</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Findings: Assessment – Comparing home country and Australia

- “Here we don’t know what to do in our assignments” (PG)

- “Here, when I find things on the internet, I can’t match with assignment questions” (UG)

- “I thought my English was satisfactory but now I know not enough [to do assignment tasks]” (UG)
Findings: Writing in home country

• Limited experiences of extended writing “assignments were to learn from the chapter”
• Predominately descriptive “you can’t make own ideas”
• Limited sources of information, therefore less opportunities for learning to synthesis and integrate references “expected to write straight from book”
• No research, paraphrasing, in text citation or referencing “no research, no referencing”
• “Nothing about plagiarism – never heard of it”
Findings: Reading and information literacy in home country

- Purpose of reading was to read and memorise the information in preparation for testing
- Comparatively little reading. Reading from the textbook and handouts in class
- Where additional sources were required “cut and paste google was norm with the list of links at the end of document” (PG)
- Reading matter prescribed “no internet ever” (UG)
- Immediate access to teacher explanation in the first language
Influences beyond the classroom

1. IS as workers, housekeepers AND students
   “…we did not have to work, no part-time job, I never cooked. The student’s job was to study.”

2. Pace of life
   “Here, no time. Everyone’s running not walking”

3. Familial and cultural life “Never was alone”
   “Family supported me”
Student strengths

• Familial high regard for education
• Experience in examination genres
• Expertise in memorising and recall
• Strong community of practice/culture of helping peers
• Persistence and resilience
### Sample Unit XXX Assessment schedule: Undergraduate/First semester

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>Week Due</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field Visit Report</td>
<td>750-1000</td>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Essay</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>Week 8</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>Week 12</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Week 14</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Specified AL requirements for first year success

- Knowledge of a wide range of assessment genres
- Ability to find and integrate 6-15 scholarly references
- Use of appropriate disciplinary academic language
- ‘Original’ ideas – no plagiarism
- Authoritative voice or stance and argumentation and evidence
- Use of correct presentation and citation style
Most students in this study have had;

- Limited opportunities to practise extended writing in English
- Little experience with assessment genres (and as social/disciplinary practices rather than skills)
- Limited knowledge of the set of linguistic capabilities or moves required to paraphrase or to make and support claims or develop authorial voice
Limitations

• Small sample
• Findings cannot be generalised to other settings or student cohorts
Conclusion

• Class may impact on academic success of IS cohort in ways similar to other Australian studies that have focused on low SES students

• Attributes and habits that were part of a student’s prior success may not be valued in the same way by institutions

“I had glorious results [at home]” (UG failed 6/8 subjects in first year)
We argue:

The first move must be made by institutions:

• to identify students’ prior educational experiences and the AL strengths/capabilities they bring

• implement teaching and learning practices that recognise, respond and build on the prior experiences of the students that they admit.
Reference List


*Degrees of Deception - Four Corners - ABC*

www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2015/04/20/4217741.htm

