

WRITING SKILLS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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SHORT SCIENTIFIC PAPER

DOI: 10.5550/sgja.110701.en.069P

COBISS.BH-ID: 2103064

UDC: 003:378.4

SUMMARY

It is beyond questioning that out of all skills students say they want to strengthen, writing poses the biggest challenge. As students in western countries enter the university, writing almost always takes on a new and challenging dimension. As students leave their protected classrooms at the *Gymnasium* for the mass education settings at universities, they quickly realize that the demands placed on them also change just as drastically. Although some elements of the kind of writing required of students at the university are taught at the secondary schools, where they are mainly required to analyze texts and then to add their own opinions, students generally find that at university quite a different kind of writing is demanded of them than they have been prepared for. Students find they are required to navigate across a much more complex terrain than they had to at the secondary schools.

Key words: writing skills, university level of teaching, academic language, English language.

INTRODUCTION

At university, students are expected to learn to write specific types of technical texts that are pertinent to the fields they are studying (Graefen, 1996). This includes adopting a style of writing appropriate to the academic field and genre the student is writing in. Students must also learn to apply a rhetoric that is characterized by an exact, systematic logical argumentation and empirical rationale. Academic writing requires students to incorporate and synthesize diverse sources of knowledge into an authoritative viewpoint.

The personal views that were called for at the secondary schools are subordinated to the ability to integrate authoritative others into a multi-perspective, where one's own voice also takes on the persona of an authority (Bartholomae, 1985). When incorporating the ideas of other researchers, students are also responsible for demonstrating critical evaluations of the works of these researchers, both in and of themselves and in comparison to other related texts (Flower & Hayes, 1980). Many students are not even aware that they are meant to assume authority in their papers – after all they are only novices – so many students consider their task to be a collation of

other peoples' views, objective and impersonal (Foster & Russell, 2002, p. 220). It is not without good reason that the term “academic writing” is not used to describe the writing students carry out at the secondary schools, but is restricted to identifying the kind of writing that is carried out at universities and beyond.

Because these characteristics of text production are not just extensions of skills learned at preparatory schools but unique skills that specifically belong to a university education (Foster & Russell, 2002), learning to adjust to this incorporative rhetoric as distinct from the rhetoric of personal argument practiced at the secondary school often “creates significant dissonance for German students” (Foster & Russell, 2002, p. 193). In a study conducted at two major German universities, Foster and Russell (2002) found that: “Students identify the writing required in seminar papers as the single most difficult learning/writing challenge at university” (p. 217). Kruse, Jakobs, and Ruhmann (1999) also found writing in English to be one of the greatest challenges to students in their learning process at university and that many students have difficulties adapting the rhetorical strategies they brought with them from secondary

schools to the new strategies they need for academic writing. Despite these differences students are confronted with in their writing needs at universities, until recently the teaching of academic writing was not regarded as worthy of receiving much attention from universities throughout Europe. In the context of contents of the courses taught in the mother tongue, university educators and administrators generally presume that their students have already been sufficiently prepared for the kind of writing they will do at university during their time at secondary schools, and that the kind of writing they will have to carry out is simply an extension of that (Furchner, Ruhmann, & Tente, 1999). It is generally assumed that those students who make it to the university can then learn to adapt their writing strategies to their new academic disciplines more or less on their own (Kruse, et al., 1999), based on the theory that once learned is forever learned. From the first semester on, students find they have to accommodate the new academic writing skills they need to learn to the content material they are learning in their courses.

There is little help available to assist students in learning to integrate the new language and knowledge of their varying disciplines with the different structures and mechanics required in the diverse genres and rhetorical modes they meet in their disciplines (Foster & Russell, 2002). Left to themselves, students must through trial and error meet the challenge of new and more complex writing needs at university by adapting and adopting new processes to those skills which they have already acquired. Students of English as a foreign language have been somewhat more fortunate than other students, for example those at Faculties of Physical Education and Sports, in that since the late

1960s academic writing in English courses have frequently become a part of the regular curriculum. However, the titles of these courses notwithstanding, as a part of the EFL program, they often tend to be more of a substitute for language skills classes focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation than on the actual academic writing needs of their students. Thus students in these departments, too, feel the pressure to adapt to the needs of academic writing on their own.

THE CHANGING UNIVERSITY SCENE

As times have changed, so have the needs of students and the society they live in. Universities are under pressure to respond to these new needs of students and society. The new European BA/MA system of study that has been recreating courses of

study at almost all European universities since the beginning of this millennium is one of the most serious attempts by politicians and educators to modernize the university curriculum so that it reflects these needs. However, what has possibly had even more influence than the new BA/MA curriculum on universities' abilities to meet these needs of their students and society is the changes in numbers which have been taking place at universities over the past decades. Although the term "elite university" is often heard when politicians talk about today's universities, the term "mass university" is more fitting to most institutes of higher education.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, most universities in Europe changed from elite to mass universities (Rienecker & Jorgensen, 2003). Approximately, three out of four of these Abitur holders go to university at some point (Antweiler, 1996). These changes have brought a more diverse student population, many of whom are not as well prepared as their carefully selected elite predecessors were. Over the past decades, as at other time of increases in student population (Flexner, 1930), the number of faculty positions has not kept pace with student numbers. Many of the classes which are classified as "seminars" appear more like lectures than the cozy classrooms of old.

Just at a time when a more diverse student population is in greater need of exclusive counseling and attention, educators are forced to divide their time among ever-greater numbers of students. Despite (or possibly because of) these changes in student composition and population, recent European reforms in the programs of study have made attempts to shorten or at least limit the length of time students study. At the same time, governments have also been concerned with the high dropout rates of students and have put pressure on universities to improve the learning situation (Kramer, 2003).

As universities have moved away from the elite system of education over the decades to the mass education of today, writing at universities has also taken on a different role. The major purpose of the writing students carry out at a university is not to express ideas that are to be transmitted to the world at large or to be discussed with the professor and fellow students.

Most writing students do at university today has taken on the all-encompassing role of being a method of evaluation. Writing is often the factor which decides whether a student is successful at university or not. A student's ability to master seminar papers, reports and exams determines whether a student will be successful at university. Writing has become the

key to survival in many fields of study. Being responsible for ever larger numbers of students, teachers are finding that little time is left to view writing as a learning process in which valuable one-to-one feedback can create a learning atmosphere in which students can grow and develop. Most writing assignments at universities become isolated writing experiences for students (Graff, 1987); they act as pivotal qualifications for the continuation of their university careers, and can make or break students' personal goals.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF A CHANGING WORLD

Despite the need for evaluative material and the time pressures of mass education, it is important not to forget that beyond being a valuable tool for weeding out the good from the bad (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991), the real objective in teaching and learning academic writing at universities extends long past the day the graduate walks out the doors of the university for the last time. Today's technological advancements in our globalized world have underscored the importance of life-long learning for the individual and society at large. The learning for today must also focus on continued learning tomorrow. Setting their goals to prepare their students to become active life-long participants in the written discourse communities of their choices is one method by which German universities, for example, can make a valuable move toward addressing the future needs of their students to remain active participants and creators of their own continued learning.

WRITING IN MANY GENRES

However, there is more at stake than just the students' survival at university and beyond. Both individual students and society at large are dependent on how well students learn to write. "As the kinds of organizations and the jobs in them that students will enter have become more specialized, the writing has become more specialized as well" (Foster & Russell, 2002, p. v). The ability of students to meet the demands of different genres and rhetorical settings in the workforce depends in large part on whether and how they have developed their writing at university (Foster & Russell, 2002). "In a larger sense, written communication is essential to the successful continuation and future development of important institutions – professional, governmental, industrial, commercial, and nonprofit – that increasingly depend on specialized written communication in a global environment" (Foster & Russell, 2002, p. 1). Students

will need a greater diversity of linguistic resources and rhetorical flexibility to successfully enter professions and institutions and to transform those institutions as the pace of change continues. Students need sufficient practice in the new genres and rhetorical strategies that belong not only to the world of academia (Swales, 1990) but to the world which the students will be entering after university. Research in genre theory verifies the need of students to gain practice in the targeted genres. So ministries of education continually take note of universities' responsibilities to improve students' writing.

CONCLUSION

In addition to students' needs to practice writing in multiple genres and rhetorical modes while at university, they also need opportunities in which they can practice writing for the sake of practice (Kruse, et al., 1999) or to put it in Krashen's (1984) terms for "sheer practice" (p. 33). There is much to be said for the old adage "practice makes perfect". Just like dancers do not go out on the stage without practicing first, academic writers, too, need opportunities to practice academic writing when there is no grade or teacher evaluation at stake. Such an environment promotes experimentation with new ideas, styles, and techniques. How are students to learn whether or not their ideas are practicable unless they try them out? Most students, however, are not willing to take risks in writing when they know it could damage their grade. When writers feel free to experiment and to express themselves, they are also more likely to enjoy putting their ideas down on paper so that others can read them. It can also be assumed that when students are given the opportunity to practice expressing their ideas in a stake-free environment, they will be likely to acquire a more favorable attitude toward writing than when only practicing writing under the threat of receiving a grade each time they write.

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Received: October 15, 2010

Accepted: Jun 4, 2011

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