

Second Language Writing Instruction: Teaching Writing to English Language Learners

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Abstract

This article discusses the academic writing challenges and needs of English as second language (ESL) students. Specifically, it aims at in-depth understanding of the needs of ESL students in academic environments with regards to academic writing across the disciplines. It also elaborates on the role of genre study (theory) in helping ESL students overcome their challenges and meet the requirements of their academic disciplines. This article calls for the importance of understanding ESL student' needs and challenges which can help in developing better instruction, dictate the curriculum, and provide a systematic support for these students to succeed and complete their degrees.

Keywords: Second language academic writing; academic writing instruction; challenges and needs; genre study; genre theory.

Introduction

According to the Institute of International Education, the number of international students enrolled in U.S. higher education increased by eight percent in 2013/14 to reach 886,052 students, with 66,408 more students than in 2012 enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States. These students come to the United States to pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees in various academic disciplines. To be successful members of the academic communities of their disciplines, these students must learn and understand the norms, standards, and procedures of academic writing in their field of study. Hyland (2006) notes that to successfully participate in a community, students must learn to communicate in a manner that is approved and accepted by that group.

Academic writing in most universities is the primary tool to assess and evaluate students' demonstration and understanding of their fields. It is also used as a means to keep track of students' progress (Hyland, 2006). If writing holds such great

importance for students in all disciplines, writing academically for English as a second language learners (ESL) is even more challenging since these students come from non-English speaking countries to study in "English dominant" universities. ESL students "must learn about the ways in which individuals think about and use language within an academic setting which generally fall under the rubric of academic discourse" (De Poel & Gasiorek, 2012, p.295).

ESL students come from a variety of linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds which suggests that these students may have varying needs and could face different challenges before they could succeed in their academics since "the nature and functions of discourse, audiences, and persuasive appeals often differ across linguistic, cultural, and educational contexts" (CCCC Statement, 2001, p. 670). Therefore, L2 learners should acquire the standards, conventions, lexicon, and the rhetorical structures of their disciplines in order to succeed and avoid being excluded

from that discourse community and disciplinary knowledge.

These students are expected to master the writing of formal essays, critiques, formal reflections, and research article, all of which are required in courses across the curriculum in U.S. institutions of higher education (Hinkel, 2002, 2004, 2015; Hyland, 2002; 2004). Therefore, it is crucial for institutions and educators to identify the

Academic Writing Nature

Academic writing is understood by many scholars as the ability of second language writers to write in academic contexts by applying academic writing conventions, rhetorical structures, lexicon, and standards of academic writing in U.S. institutions of higher education (Casanave, 2002; Hinkel, 2002, 2003, 2004; Hyland, 2002). Therefore, for ESL students to be successful in their disciplines, it is very important that students learn and master the linguistic and rhetorical forms of writing within the specific academic genres in their disciplines. One way to achieve this goal is through formal instruction of these conventions in the context of academic writing courses in colleges and universities. Through formal instruction in these classes, students learn the conventions of different academic genres such as reflections, reports, and research article, persuasive and argumentative essays.

The role of the teacher here is very important as these students need as much support as they can get to help them acquire and apply these new and unfamiliar conventions to their writing in order to be successful in academia and be part of their respective discourse communities (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2004; Lillis & Turner, 2001).

Many researchers suggest thinking of students' needs beyond the linguistic boundaries and taking into account the

academic writing challenges and needs of ESL students in order to help in developing better instruction and provide a systematic support for these students to succeed and complete their degrees.

Thus, this article aims at in-depth understanding of the needs of ESL students in academic environments with regards to academic writing across the disciplines.

sociocultural stance of academic literacy (Hyland, 2002, 2006; Ivanic and Weldon, 1999; Norton, 1997). What these researchers suggest is that academic writing is more than the conveying of content, it also carries a representation of the writer's identity, perspectives and thoughts. Considering this dimension provides students with the ability to construct their own representation that is socially acceptable in their own community of practice and becomes part of the academic discourse and knowledge. Moreover, Hyland (2002) argues that writers "have to select their words so that the readers are drawn in, influenced and persuaded" (p.1093) and should also show "authoritativeness" of the written text in different disciplines. In order for these students to speak with authority, they have to use different and new identities, voices and adopt the beliefs, values, and language of their disciplinary community.

For students to be part of their communities, they also have to understand and acquire knowledge and competence about the "discursive practices" and the expectations of different academic disciplines (Hyland, 2004). In fact, this entails the need for students to have new perspectives and relate the knowledge of their disciplinary communities in different ways. Academic writing then requires not

only understanding of the conventions and the rhetorical structures of students' disciplines but also knowledge about the language structure and the terminology used in that discipline which in turn requires different identities and ways of self-representation (Bruce, 2008; Hyland, 2004; Russell, 2002).

While this may apply to native speakers studying in different disciplines, it represents a huge challenge since ESL students come from different cultures, with different linguistic knowledge and conventions of writing. Research shows that second language writers always negotiate their background knowledge--cultural, linguistic knowledge--and their L1 conventions with the nature, goals, and expectations of academic writing in L2 (Csizer & Dornyei, 2005; Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008). This finding suggests the need for teachers to understand and focus on the individual characteristics of their students so they can help them acquire the conventions of L2 to improve their academic writing in different disciplines. Some of these characteristics are prior knowledge, purpose of learning, motivation for learning, the culture they come from, and their proficiency in L2. Considering these variables, teachers may locate problems facing students in their academic writing and understand where they come from since every ESL writer has his/her own perception and understanding of what academic writing is since they are used to different systems of thinking and different styles of writing.

Many researchers emphasize the importance of understanding the goals and motivation of students in becoming part of their disciplinary communities (Baldwin, 2001; Hornberger, 2003). Realizing the importance of considering L2 writers'

characteristics advances our understanding of the nature of academic writing. Academic writing as a complex highly specialized cultural and linguistic system can simply be understood not only by considering the linguistic and disciplinary knowledge, but also by considering the interaction between the second language writer and the sociocultural environment/system where academic writing happens and how they make meaning of it (Mahn, 2008; Yang, Baba, & Cumming, 2004). ESL Researchers like Matsuda (2003) and Mahn (2008) show that thinking about academic writing as a continuous interaction between second language learners and the academic context leads to "qualitative transformation" of the L2 writer and academic writing itself as a process that happens at the same time. This suggests that second language academic writing is not a form of reproduction and imitation of the rhetorical conventions of a specific discipline, but it is an active ongoing process between ESL writers and the L2 academic writing using different cultural, social, and individual characteristics which intersect and change over time (Cumming, Busch and Zhou, 2002).

Recently, there seems to be an increased interest shift from the undergraduate student writing to the graduate student writing. These students may experience different threats to their identities because they are not only asked to understand the rhetorical, linguistic and cultural conventions of their disciplinary communities, but also expected to write theses and dissertations, conference proposals and book reviews, publish articles, and work collaboratively on research with faculty and other graduate students. Research has found that ESL graduate students have identity conflicts due to their disciplinary experience in their L1. They face difficulties with the

new language, styles of writing, and culture, and it becomes hard for them to express all this knowledge in writing in English (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Connor & Kramer, 1995; Leki, 2006; Raymond & Parks, 2002).

Research shows that Masters students regard themselves as beginners in the field, rely mainly on grades and do rarely see themselves as part of a community of practice (Casanave, 2002) compared to PhD students who are usually required to know the literacy practices that govern their disciplines (Belcher, 1995; Cadman, 1997). Some studies further show graduate students either do not take academic writing classes or just take general-focus L2 writing courses. Even for these general classes, ESL graduate students maintain that these courses do not support their learning and even at times conflict with the needed disciplinary practices (Hansen, 2000; Schneider & Fujishima, 1995). Other studies show L2 graduate academic writers' success only when professors believe the fact that these students will not simply align with themselves to the standards of the disciplines, but rather alter and shape it with the rich cultural background knowledge they are bringing to this discipline (see Belcher, 1997; Casanave, 2002). More

research was concerned with the relationship between students and their academic advisors. This kind of research revealed that L2 students were disadvantaged by not getting opportunities to work with advisors on publications because of their lack of experience in academic writing and therefore preventing these students from participating in the larger disciplinary community and establish their professional presence (see Dong, 1998; Tardy, 2005). Another graduate writers' success was found when students collaborate with peers and mentors especially when working on publications across linguistic and cultural boundaries to expand the "center-based knowledge" from their own perspectives (Cho, 2004).

The research suggests that there should be more research to study in-depth the nature of the relation between graduate students and their mentors (advisors), and their negotiation of their social responsibilities in terms of academic and scholarly writing. Understanding this kind of interaction will help educators and teachers get a closer look at the needs and challenges of second language writers and guide future research to empirical research that looks for suggestions and recommendations for meet these challenges and needs.

Second Language Academic Writing Instruction

To help L2 learners improve their academic writing skills, educators and scholars should first consider what is valued and not valued in their disciplines in colleges and universities, and what the professors' expectations are. And then the educators and scholars should have a deeper understanding of the students' challenges based on empirical research so that they can recommend practical solutions for the students to overcome their academic writing challenges.

Three broad-based reports from studies conducted by Hale et al., (1996); the (ICAS) Intersegmental California Academic Senate, (2002); and Rosenfeld, Courtney, and Fowles, (2004) investigate the academic written assignment required of students in different academic disciplines such as humanities, fine arts, engineering, science, and general education majors. These studies investigated eight American and Canadian universities, 33 universities and 109 Community Colleges in California, and 33

U.S. universities respectively. The first study (Hale et al., 1996) surveyed the academic writing tasks required from students in different disciplines such as English, chemistry, history, and computer science, while the second study (ICAS, 2002) focused on the characteristics of academic writing ability necessary for post-secondary students in California. The third study investigated the kind of academic tasks and their specific rhetorical structure that are needed for students in different disciplines. The findings reveal some recurring themes placing the content knowledge and the language used in their disciplines as a priority. Students should show grammar competence, complex sentence structures, development of academic vocabulary and punctuation conventions (Hinkel, 2015). The second theme is that the written work of the students was seen as a reflection of the students' mastery and understanding of the course material. In addition, there seemed to be a clear focus on the quality of the written product including content organization, grammatical accuracy and the use of academic vocabulary. The need for such reports is of high importance as research shows that a majority of undergraduate and many graduate students in U.S. colleges and universities are poorly prepared for their academic writing tasks in their disciplines including native speakers and second language writers (Hinkel, 2015). These kinds of reports will guide the forms of instructions and practices needed and recommend what should be included in the curriculum for successful academic writing. The findings of the reports discussed above express the need for direct and explicit instruction in academic English to increase L2 students' awareness of the rhetorical structures, language expectations and different modes of their disciplines (Hinkel,

2002, 2003, 2004, 2015; Schleppegrell, 2004; Silva, 1993). From the findings of the faculty surveys, the instructors' practices besides the curriculum should fulfill the need of L2 writers with the academic vocabulary and grammatical structures needed by these students to be able to make meaning and interpret knowledge in their different disciplines. They also suggest that students learn the "discourse organization skills" and the ability to organize the ideas in a clear systematic way since each discipline has its own structure for formal academic writing. Other areas that need to be addressed are editing skills to overcome at least the punctuation and spelling errors.

The research conducted after these reports about L2 writers' challenges and needs suggests or uncovers that little seems to have changed in academic writing in the disciplinary courses (See Hedgcock, 2005; Hinkel, 2009, 2011; Nation, 2005, 2011, 2013, Song, 2006). Song (2006) investigated the effectiveness of content-based language instruction on freshman ESL undergraduate students' academic writing performance on the long term. He sought to find out whether this kind of instruction helps students to overcome challenges they had in their academic writing. Song found out that most of the challenges are mainly because of limited knowledge of the target language (academic terminology), lack of interest, and undeveloped L1 reading and writing skills. The study compared content-linked ESL students' academic achievement with that of non-content-linked ESL students. Students were asked to expand the writing they did for their classes from their disciplines drawing on material and content and apply what they learned from the ESL class, including linguistic and rhetorical conventions for academic writing. Findings

from this study and similar studies (see Kasper, 1997; Murie & Thomson, 2001) show that ESL students in the content linked ESL program performed significantly better than the non-content linked group. The researcher noted that the improvement of these students' academic writing proficiency, which may also be used to overcome the challenges of the other students, is due to the collaborative nature of the program that supports these students by providing counseling, tutoring, and conferencing. An important implication from this study is that ESL students need not only academic proficiency but also the available services that could help them be integrated in the academic community. This study also calls for teachers to have awareness of students' need for more support to discuss the issues that ESL writers face in their writing assignments, and understand students' needs and problems more and in detail.

The importance of instructors' support was also emphasized and proved to help second language writers improve their academic writing skills and performance (Storch, 2009). In her study, Storch investigated L2 developments in reading and writing of 25 ESL students after a semester of study. The findings claimed improvement in the students' academic writing skills in terms of structure and content development; that is, in presenting more well-developed and coherent arguments, and more appropriate conclusions. These improvements are important because they are elements of good academic writing and express what is expected from students to acquire in their different academic disciplines (Leki, 2007; Storch & Tapper, 2000). Storch's study found that ESL students do not know how to cite and quote sources in a correct way and that they seem

not to elaborate on or add to these sources, which suggests an issue of voice and the ongoing concerns about plagiarism in academic writing. These problems may have resulted from the lack of feedback and the limited time of the study, which was only one semester.

Nation (2008) maintains that one important method in helping L2 students learn the rhetorical organization and content development of their disciplines is for students to read like writers. Reading like writers requires a close examination and careful analysis of the text features and the way it is organized. However, Hinkel (2015) clarifies that for this analysis to be successful "the curriculum and instruction need to focus on the valued features of coherent and accurate prose and how it is constructed. It is difficult to learn writing without a clear understanding of the structure of writing, information sequencing, and key points" (p.73).

Another method that is suggested by many researchers to help L2 writers acquire the discourse conventions is by using models (Bruce, 2008; Hyland, 2003, 2006; Leki, 1995; Macbeth, 2010). Macbeth (2010) for example examined the usefulness of using models with her 19 undergraduate English language learners in their first quarter of college in an Intermediate-level ESL Composition course over a 10-week period. The students were asked to write an essay discussing the differences and similarities in two articles after analyzing several sample essays (on different topics) and examining a template of rhetorical moves common to the comparison and contrast essays. The researcher found that models "offered students something they could do to turn in an assignment on time" and not something they can rely on but rather as a starting point to display basic

principles they should lead to shape a more sophisticated academic writing prose. It was also found that analyzing the model and identifying its insufficiencies were important to the students' development of competent academic writing. These findings were similar to the findings by Leki (1995, 2007). Both studies confirm the importance of models and offer L2 writers with very clear guidelines about the writing style, the text structure, and the audience. It's also safe to assume that it increases the student's awareness of the appropriate language and vocabulary expected in different disciplines. This approach can play an important role in decreasing the challenges L2 academic writers face in many different ways.

One reason that the academic discourse properties are difficult for ESL writers to attain is that they represent "culturally bound, conventionalized, and abstract characteristics of academic prose that are frequently absent in written discourse in rhetorical traditions other than the English dominant educational environments (Hinkel, 1999a, 2014, 2015). This entails the need of ESL writers for a deep understanding of the L2 academic culture including the text's linguistic features, purpose, audience, text organization, and clarity of ideas and support of main ideas. All these elements increase L2 writers' awareness of these structures and develop the communicative skills necessary for students to participate in particular academic discourses (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). Negotiating and understanding the requirements of academic discourse can have important consequences for second language academic writers. By

getting this kind of required genre awareness, students will not just imitate and copy a style of writing given to them as a model, but they will also be able to start developing a type of ownership and authority of the written form through multiple voices and identities in academic writing (Canagarajah, 2001). Another need suggested by the research is the need for collaboration between disciplinary specialists, writing specialists, teachers and students.

This shows that academic writing in a second language is a socio-cultural journey where experts and educators can work together and identify students' needs in order to address these needs and challenges in the curriculum. In addition, research shows that feedback and student conferencing play an important role to negotiate students' use of lexical phrases, meaning, and strategies. Studies show that feedback and conferencing not only lead to improved grammatical accuracy (Ferris, 2003; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998) but also lead to improvement in lexical complexity (e.g., Leki, 2007; Storch & Tapper, 2007). Other needs include the students' need to know what kind of support and resources are offered to them. It is also worth mentioning here that besides all the previously discussed needs by both undergraduate and graduate students, there seems to be a recent increased attention to L2 students' needs for thesis and dissertation writing preparation in addition to scholarly writing for the purpose of publication.

Genre Study

Genre study advocates the explicit study of the conventions and expectations of the target discourse community that students belong to (Brick, 2012; Casanave, 1995,

2002; Hammond & Derewianka, 2011; Hyland, 2002, 2004; Johns, 1997, 2002, 2003; Prior, 1995, 1998; Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 2004). Those who work

with genre analysis believe that the close examination and analysis of texts can provide students with the structures and features for writing in their specific disciplines. In addition, genre study assists students with the contexts and functions these features and structures serve for discourse communities and shows the importance of cultural and social contexts of language use (Hammond & Derewianka, 2011; Swales, 1998). Hyland (2004) refers to genre analysis as a “visible pedagogy” (p.8) as students are supposed to apply the findings of genre analysis to specific language use and therefore to production and independent construction.

There are three approaches to genre analysis: English for specific purposes whose scholars draw on work from the field in which the discourse analysis aims at helping students recognize the language patterns they will encounter in their academic disciplines (Swales, 1990, 1998; Bhatia, 1993). The main focus is to identify the “communicative purpose and formal language features of genres in these contexts” (Hammond & Derewianka, 2011, p. 186). Second is the work of New Rhetoric on genre. The emphasis here lies in getting more in-depth understanding of the social and cultural contexts where different genres occur and the social purposes these genres serve or are used for (Hyon, 1996). The third approach to genre studies is the systemic functional linguistics, which was developed in Australia and incorporates many features that shape this approach (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Hammond and Derewianka (2011) summarize these features as “a focus on the interrelationship between language text and the context in which those texts occur; analytic tools deriving from the description of discourse and language resources of

English and an emphasis on the interrelationship between spoken and written modes of English” (p.187).

These features assist L2 writers to predict the language patterns governed by specific social functions in different disciplines. This will facilitate identifying how academic texts are organized and what makes them coherent. This model suggests that ESL students should first develop content knowledge, and then talk about the content using the structure discussed above.

All these approaches suggest that programs should incorporate not only the teaching of text structure and organization of different genres, but also the relationship between these structures and the social functions they serve in different discourse communities.

Most research associated with genre theory/study focuses on the teaching practices and pedagogies since the main concern of genre study is to identify and analyze formal features of academic texts which suggests explicit type of instruction (Casanave, 2004; Hyland, 2003, 2006; Hyon, 1996). Therefore, the main focus on research is how genre study can help ESL writers overcome the challenges and meet the requirements and expectations of their different disciplinary communities and what practices teachers and educators should implement or take into consideration to achieve these needs and goals.

In an attempt to address the challenges faced by ESL novice and more experienced academic writers to start writing academic articles, Swales (1990) developed CARS (Create a Research Space) model after extensive analysis of examples of academic articles expressing the steps and strategies to write and organize an introduction of academic articles. With this model Swales implies that for identifying the formal

features of texts in various disciplines, he would argue for a pedagogy that values “explicitness over exploration and discovery” (p. 82). Bhatia (1993, 1997) influenced by the work of Swales later on also developed a model to discuss the steps necessary for any student to understand the genre they are studying. This model, which was developed by taking into consideration the interests of ESL students, finds out that the communicative purpose is of crucial importance for the analysis of any genre in any discipline. Bhatia’s argument shows that genre is learned by participating in the activities of the target community. In other words, learning a genre is contextual emphasizing the engagement of students in discourse communities and not only a **Genre teaching practices.**

As mentioned above, the genre-based approach implements tasks that encourage students to explore the cultural context of their disciplines; it helps L2 writers understand the relationship between the genre and the cultural context where specific genres are used. These tasks serve as an eye-opener to consider writing as multi-dimensional, “where the processes involved and the features of the text produced are very much shaped by sociocultural norms and interpersonal relationships within the context in which the writing takes place” (Storch, 2009). One task recommended by Swales (1990a) is to ask EAP (English for Academic Purposes) students to interview experts from their different disciplines to get a clear picture of their interest, concerns, and expectations. This way, ESL students will be able to understand the expectations from their disciplines and get better understanding of the requirements for becoming a successful member of that specific discourse community.

textual kind of engagement (Casanave, 1995, 2002; Johns, 2002; Tardy, 2006). Analyzing and teaching the genre is descriptive in nature and not prescriptive. A descriptive approach to genre study implies that what all students have to do to understand the genre in their disciplines and produce good academic articles is to simply study the basic textual features and structures. This suggests that genre is about teaching fixed patterns of forms while it should be regarded as tendencies that “encourage students to understand the choices they make in the production of particular texts so they draw on this information for their own rhetorical and communicative purposes” (Paltridge, 2012, p.181).

Another task is to analyze the target situation. These kinds of tasks require cooperation between the teacher and student to identify the language demands relevant to students’ needs and goals. Research has showed that second language writers face a challenge to establish an “authorial” identity or voice in their disciplines since each discipline has its own way and structure to show authority and voice; what is appropriate in one discipline may not be so in another. One example is the use of self-mention and hedges (see Brick, 2012; Hyland, 2001, 2002, 2005). Some students believe that it is not acceptable to incorporate self-reference in academic writing while it is used but for different functions in some disciplines. Using hedges is another problem facing L2 writers; students might not only lack the knowledge of how to use them but also may not understand their use when they read. Therefore, assisting students in understanding the function of these structures and noticing their different uses can help students develop an appropriate

voice and authorial identity in their writing (Brick, 2012).

Analyzing models of specific genres is also an example of other teaching practice tasks associated specifically with the systemic functional linguistics. This kind of tasks gives ESL writers the opportunity to closely analyze texts and identify the rhetorical features and understand the features they will incorporate later when they perform academic writing in their disciplines (Bhatia, 1997; Christie, 1995a). This also entails that teachers and students work together to write a sample of a specific genre following the analysis of the model and supported by the teacher. Getting support and feedback from teachers is crucial here as it may play an important role in increasing the students' confidence and helping them to be successful when they start writing independently (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Teachers can also utilize the models to help L2 writers overcome the problem of citation practices and plagiarism (Chandrasoma, Thomson, & Pennycook, 2004; Sapp, 2002; Sutherland-Smith, 2004). After raising students' consciousness and recognition on how to establish voice and identity in different disciplines, the teacher can also emphasize the importance and different citation practices by identifying these structures in the model text and later experiment with these in their own academic writing.

Identification of grammatical structure also seems to be a common type of task in genre-based approach. A great deal of

research determined the importance of grammar and lexical instruction for second language academic writers (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Ferris, 2011; Kaplan, 2005). These studies found that the grammatical and lexical structures used in the writing, and how and why they were used can change the text's structure, cohesion, clarity, and communicative purposes. Therefore, it is very important for L2 writers who find learning grammatical structures challenging to study and apply in their disciplinary writing to learn the specific grammatical and lexical structures used in their discourse community. The genre-based approach helps ESL students identify and focus on the grammatical patterns and how they vary between genres (Hammond & Derewianka, 2011).

It seems very important to address all these needs and tasks in the curriculum and instruction of ESL students. Curriculum designed based on genre-based approaches should be able not only to develop the ability of students to write a text by recognizing linguistic features and organization, but also to understand values and attitudes of the particular discourse community. Even though there is a constant debate about the explicit pedagogy of genre teaching and the most effective way to help students develop knowledge about language, genre theorists believe that language is a system of making meaning--what Halliday calls "a social semiotic system"--governed by the social and cultural conventions.

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Suggested reference format to cite this article:

Kanakri, A. (2016, November). Second Language Writing Instruction: Teaching Writing to English Language Learners. *Beyond Words*, 4(2), 88-101. Retrieved from <http://journal.wima.ac.id/index.php/BW>

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