Academic Writing in Intercultural Contexts: Integrating Conventions and Personal Voice

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Abstract

There is often a tension in education between the need to teach pre-determined skills required for social life and the wish to facilitate individual growth towards self-fulfilment. In intercultural communication there is often a similar tension between externally-determined conventions and individual self-expression. The adoption of unfamiliar external conventions may help a person to gain acceptance by members of a second-language society but may conflict with forms of self-expression which derive from the native-language culture. In writing academic English, for example, strict conformity to the supposedly linear nature of English rhetorical patterns may leave insufficient space for second-language students to find their own voice in their writing. On the other hand, self-expression which ignores these conventions may result in ineffective communication and failure to be accepted.

In order to reconcile these potentially conflicting demands, the teaching of English academic writing to second-language students needs to be guided by a model which emphasises the joint interactive nature of writing and reading. In designing courses we need to start from principles which govern effective writing in all contexts. When applied to the academic context, these principles lead students naturally to consider alternative discourse patterns not as rigid conventions, but as ways of improving communication with their readers.

Introduction

In teaching English academic writing to students from other cultures, an important task is to find ways of introducing students to the patterns and conventions of academic discourse whilst, at the same time, helping them to express their own voice through their writing. If we
place too much emphasis on teaching externally-defined conventions, we may suppress individual expression and creativity. If, on the other hand, students do not learn to operate the conventions to which their readers are accustomed, the latter may find their writing difficult to process and evaluate it negatively. A balance must therefore be found between, at the one extreme, dull conformity to external norms and, at the other, unconstrained self-expression.

This article will first relate these two apparently conflicting elements (conformity and individual expression) to two conceptions of the purposes of education and two strategies in language teaching. It will then consider some ways in which the same conflict may affect us when we communicate in intercultural contexts. From there it will move into the domain of teaching English academic writing to students from other cultures and suggest implications for the design of courses.

The Purposes of Education

In his widely-quoted analysis of educational value systems, Skilbeck (1982) distinguishes three main views of the purposes of education. The first he calls "classical humanism", which views the main purpose of education as being to transmit valued knowledge and culture from one generation to the next. The second is "reconstructionism", according to which the main purpose of education is to equip students with the skills and knowledge they need in order to be useful members of society. The third is "progressivism", which views the main purpose of education as being to help each individual develop his or her individual self and reach personal fulfilment. In particular times and places, one or other of these views has been dominant, but they are not mutually exclusive and usually co-exist with varying degrees of emphasis.

In most modern educational contexts, the transmission of valued knowledge as an end in itself gains little support. Such knowledge needs also to be justified as contributing either to the second goal (the development of skills for social life) or to the third (the growth of the individual). For present purposes, we will therefore simplify Skilbeck's framework and summarise the purposes of education as in Figure 1.
These two conceptions of education imply different conceptions of knowledge and of how the individual student is placed in relation to this knowledge. In the left-hand box, knowledge is defined initially independently of the individual. In describing what students should know and do, we try to analyse in objective terms what knowledge and skills they need in order to satisfy the demands of social life. The expected end-point of each stage of education can then be described in terms of objectives which students should master. In the right-hand box, by contrast, each individual is expected to create to a greater or lesser extent his or her own knowledge, since no two persons develop in the same way. Rather than specifying the end-point of each stage in advance, the emphasis is therefore on determining what experiences and contexts the students need in order to develop to their own full potential.

In their extreme forms, the two conceptions of education point towards diametrically opposite educational strategies. The first points towards complete control of the learning process (e.g. as in behaviourism). The second points towards giving learners unlimited freedom to explore and discover. In practice, however, neither extreme would be possible. Complete control would not be possible, because learning takes place within individuals and cannot be steered directly
from outside. Complete freedom would not be possible, because learning is always constrained by external factors such as expectations and available resources.

Two Strategies in Language Teaching

The two conceptions of the purposes of education described in the previous section are mirrored in the debate between two alternative strategies for teaching language. Stern (1990), following Allen (1983), calls these the "analytic" strategy and the "experiential" strategy. The analytic strategy involves specifying objectives, presenting predetermined items and, as far as possible, controlling the process to ensure that these are learnt; "the learner stands away, so to speak, from the language in use, examines it, or rehearses and practices it in some way" (Stern, 1990, p. 98). This is related to the first conception of education described above. The experiential strategy, by contrast, involves creating situations in which learners can develop language in individual, spontaneous ways; "activities are arranged in such a way as to engage the learner in some purposeful enterprise ... Experiential teaching creates conditions for real language use" (Stern, 1990, pp. 102-3). This is similar to the second conception of education. These connections are shown in Figure 2.

In language teaching, the debate is not only about the purposes of learning but also (indeed, even more) about the psychological processes which underlie language learning and the conditions under which it occurs most effectively. It is primarily a debate, then, about the relative contributions that the two models of learning can make to communicative proficiency. From the available evidence, Stern concludes that "in order to achieve the highest degree of effectiveness, the two orientations should be considered complementary" (1990, p.106). A similar conclusion underlies the proposed synthesis between the skill learning model of learning and the natural growth model proposed in Littlewood (1992).
Figure 2: Approaches to education and language teaching
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Intercultural Differences in Ways of Communicating

The same basic tension between conformity (to prescribed patterns of behaviour) and freedom (to create one’s own patterns) is evident in intercultural communication. When we speak with members of another culture, there are important ways in which their interpretations of what and how we speak will be influenced by their own communicative norms rather than ours; there are therefore good reasons for conforming to these norms, even if they seem "foreign" to us. On the other hand, since we need to express our personal thoughts and meanings, there are also good reasons for using patterns of communication which reflect as directly as possible our own mind and personality, whether or not these patterns conform to the expectations of people around us.

Over the past two decades, language teachers have become increasingly aware of the extent to which conventions of communication in different communities vary beyond the superficially obvious levels of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. These differing patterns have been revealed also by an increasing number of studies in contrastive discourse analysis (surveyed, for example, in Odlin, 1989; also in Clyne, 1994 for spoken discourse and Leki, 1991 for written discourse). In spoken discourse, the domains in which differing patterns have been found include:

1. Requesting strategies. For example, German speakers tend to be more direct than English speakers in the way they express requests. When they use English, German speakers often transfer their native language pattern and sound rude or aggressive (House, 1989).

2. Strategies for refusing requests. American English speakers tend to make a statement of sympathy (e.g. I’d love to help you ...) then a statement of regret (e.g. I'm really sorry ...) and a fairly specific excuse (e.g. I have to baby-sit that night). Japanese speakers tend to begin with a statement of regret and follow this with a more vague excuse, which may seem insincere to Americans (Beebe et al., 1990).

3. Apologies. For example, native speakers of English are more inclined to express apologies than native speakers of Hebrew (Olshtain, 1983); American speakers of English tend to sound more self-effacing and humble than Venezuelan speakers of Spanish, who use a more casual style of apologising (García, 1989);
speakers use apologies in a wider range of contexts than English speakers, e.g. as part of expressing thanks (Loveday, 1982).

4. Styles of interaction. East-coast Americans sometimes overwhelm their interlocutors (even other Americans) by the intensity of their responses (such as Wow! and No kidding!) while they are listening (Tannen, 1984). Compared to Americans, speakers of Thai and Japanese prefer more regulated forms of communication, with less intense involvement (Richards and Sukwiwat, 1984).

5. Attitudes to silence. Finns can tolerate much longer stretches of silence than British speakers, who may soon develop a sense of discomfort in such situations (Lehtonen and Sajavaara, 1985). According to Loveday (1982, p. 8), Japanese speakers' “hesitancy to speak out and verbalize [their] thoughts and feelings may be interpreted in the L2 setting as coldness, hostility, unconcern and even wiliness”, whilst, “from the Japanese viewpoint, the Westerner is the culprit who should rather be taught how to shut up”.

In the domain of written discourse, a large number of studies have claimed to show differences between the rhetorical patterns preferred by English writers and those preferred (or at least, allowed) by writers from other cultures. According to the seminal study by Kaplan (1966) and others after him (see for example overviews in Houghton and Hoey, 1983; Leki, 1991), English writing proceeds typically in a straight line. Thus, in an ideal English paragraph, there is a topic statement, which controls the ideas in the paragraph; the other sentences in the paragraph elaborate on these ideas, e.g. by explaining them or exemplifying them, but do not digress into other topics. At a higher level, too, the overall development of the ideal English essay is linear: the introduction signals the main themes, which are dealt with in successive paragraphs in the body of the essay, leading to a conclusion which looks back at the essay. A short or medium-length essay may therefore follow the pattern shown in Figure 3.
Some of the contrasting patterns of organisation found in other cultures include the following:

1. Korean discourse patterns allow writers to shift the topic comparatively abruptly within a single paragraph. Korean readers accept this and can process the resulting paragraphs with little difficulty, whereas English-speaking readers are more likely to find them incoherent (Eggington, 1987).

2. In Hindi, it is common to use a non-linear, cyclical form of paragraph structure, in which a theme is viewed from different perspectives (Kachru, 1983). Similarly, according to Pandharipande...
3. The conventions of German academic writing allow lengthy digressions which, to English readers, often appear to lead away from the main topic (Clyne, 1987).

4. Japanese texts often follow a four-part structure, in which the third part seems (to an English-speaking reader) to introduce a topic which is only indirectly related to the first two parts (Hinds, 1983).

The situation is more complex than these examples might suggest. In all cases we are dealing not with fixed characteristics but with patterns or trends within communities as a whole; individual speakers or writers will therefore differ widely in the extent to which they follow these patterns. Thus some of the studies mentioned above (Kachru, Pandharipande and Hinds) found not only texts following "traditional" patterns but also texts which followed the linear pattern claimed to be typically English. This supposed linearity of English has itself been questioned (e.g. by Braddock, 1974), as also has the much-quoted "spiral" structure which Kaplan (1966) found in Chinese students' essays (see Mohan and Lo, 1985; Wong, 1988). Nonetheless, there is clear evidence that, when speakers from different cultures use language, they are likely to vary systematically in their expectations about how the discourse will proceed and their criteria for evaluating what kinds of discourse are acceptable. In some situations, this variation may lead to misunderstanding, communication breakdown and even rejection.

An important feature of expectations and conventions such as those described above is that they are often closely associated with deep-seated values and orientations. For example, Gu (1990, p. 240) argues that Chinese politeness conventions are based on notions which derive ultimately from the teachings of Confucius; Mao (1992) sees the nature of Chinese invitational discourse as playing an important role in balancing public and private aspects of the participants' identity; Matsumoto (1989, p. 219) argues that the rules for speaking in Japanese are motivated by specifically Japanese conceptions of the role of social context in governing communication and can therefore only be understood on the basis of "a solid understanding of what is communicated and what is considered important in a particular language or culture"; Morisaki and Gudykunst (1994) show how many of the
differences in Japanese and American ways of communicating may be related to fundamentally different conceptions of the self.

**Contrasting Approaches to Intercultural Differences**

The examples and comments in the previous section raise important issues for English teaching. We can relate these issues back to the two views of education and language teaching discussed in the previous section.

The first view of education, mirrored in the analytic teaching strategy, is that it is a means of equipping people with the skills required for successful social activity. According to this conception, we could simply take the discourse conventions that exist in English-speaking communities, set up controlled learning situations and attempt to teach these conventions through analysis and practice. This is the approach adopted by many of the teaching materials based on the findings of contrastive analysis. For example, Reid and Lindstrom (1985, pp. ix-xiii) state unequivocally that since "students from different language or cultural backgrounds have writing strategies and objectives different from American strategies", the English teacher's task is to teach them how to write "the kind of paragraphs American college and university students write" and "the kind of paragraphs an American college or university professor expects to read". However ethnocentric such a statement may sound, it reflects the actual distribution of power, which can override other intercultural considerations in the student-professor relationship.

The second view of education, mirrored in the experiential teaching strategy, is that it is a means of facilitating individual growth and development. According to this conception, we simply engage the students with the English language in its various manifestations and encourage them to develop their communication skills through engaging in various forms of language use. This is the direction indicated by some proponents of process approaches to teaching writing (discussed e.g. by Pennington and Cheung, 1995; Susser, 1994 and Silva, 1990, pp. 15-16).

In its extreme form, neither approach would be feasible or desirable. The first approach would involve asking learners to replace patterns of
thinking and behaving which are deeply rooted in their sociocultural experiences and form an integrated part of their personality. To ask them to do this would be neither practical nor ethical. The second approach would involve encouraging learners to communicate without regard for the expectations and conventions of their interlocutors. The resulting communication strategies would not only be inefficient but could also lead to disadvantage and discrimination. The way ahead must therefore lie in finding an appropriate balance between the two approaches. We must make available to learners the tools for successful existence within the second-language community but, ultimately, leave to them the decision as to how they will use these tools. Students need opportunities to develop, in their individual language use, a synthesis of elements from their native culture, the second language culture and their own personality, so that they can speak with their own voice through a new language.

The Student’s Voice in Academic Writing

In this final section I will relate the discussion of the previous sections to the teaching of writing in academic contexts. To begin, here are two quotations which summarise, in relation to writing, the two opposing needs that have to be reconciled. The first is from Leki (1991, p. 138):

It seems clear that ESL teachers have a responsibility to teach the expectations of the English audience to L2 writers. Research in reading shows that readers understand better what they are familiar with and this applies both to content and to form, that is, to rhetorical patterns of development.

However, in teaching these expectations, we must also encourage students to express their own selves and not allow artificial restrictions to hinder their attempts:

It is precisely when we deny students their personal attempts at expression that we limit their capacity for making sense and clarifying meaning as they engage with those in a new community, thus lessening their ability to understand and identify with them (Zamel, 1993, p. 32).
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The first of these quotations focuses attention on the reader, the second on the writer. Taken together, they remind us that the processes of reading and writing are complementary: the reader and the writer are engaged in an extended act of communication in which the needs of both interlocutors have to be respected. Since, however, it is the writer who controls the course of the communication, it is also the writer who is responsible not only for fulfilling his or her own expressive needs but also for attending constantly (through an extended process of role taking) to the needs of the readers.

"Role-taking" refers here to the efforts of a speaker or writer to step into the listener's or reader's role and view the communication process from the perspective of the receiver. It involves making an "imaginative leap" into the receivers' minds in order to estimate the background knowledge and assumptions that they bring to the communication, judge their expectations and linguistic competence, take account of the shared knowledge that has been created by the context or preceding text and (as a result) formulate the new messages in accessible ways. Role-taking is essential for all interpersonal communication (c.f. Samovar and Porter, 1995, p. 284) but it is especially important in pedagogical settings, where the communication process moves around the limits of the participants' current knowledge and seeks to extend it. It is also especially demanding in writing, since a writer has to formulate long sequences of messages for receivers who cannot make known the state of their current knowledge or ask for clarification. Thus, for extended periods and with no immediate feedback, writers have to perform simultaneous roles as writers and readers of their texts.

A fruitful metaphor for writing as a communicative act is to view writing and reading together as a joint journey through ideas (c.f. Littlewood, 1995). It is the writer who leads this journey; however, it is the needs of the reader that are paramount. If, on any particular journey, the patterns of expression or organisation which the writer uses are difficult to process, the writer is an ineffective leader, whether or not those same patterns would have been accessible on some other journey in some other landscape. Therefore, since the conventions and patterns of a specific community of readers form part of these readers' mental landscape and help them to orient themselves on a particular journey, they are also important factors in writing competently for that
community. However, since the leader of the journey is the writer, the
conventions and patterns must serve messages that come from the
writer's own voice. It is between these two poles - the messages of the
writer and the needs of the reader - that a balance has to be reached
between the competing demands of self-expression and conformity.

At this level of fundamental principle, academic writing involves the
same essential insights and skills as other forms of writing. It differs only
in the specific nature of the messages to be conveyed and the readership
which will receive them. Thus, a course in academic writing is
underpinned by the same principles as other writing courses; it differs
from them only in the practical details of its implementation. As one
example amongst many of how this might take place, I will refer to a
writing course for first-year students of education at the University of
Hong Kong.

Within the overall sequencing of this course, we attempt to begin
where the students are when they enter the university, by drawing first
on their personal experience and social relationships as a basis for written
communication. Students begin by choosing individual topics that
interest them; their classmates write questions indicating what they
would be interested to know about these topics; and each student writes
in response to these questions and for the benefit of his or her classmates.
The purpose of this is to strengthen their awareness of writing as an act
of communication and of their readers as partners in this
communication. The interactional nature of writing and reading
continues to be stressed, as the students proceed from writing about
themselves, to writing about people and events, and then to writing
about their personal experiences in education. The theme "education"
acts as a bridge which links personal writing to writing for more overtly
"academic" purposes.

The sequence described above is concerned mainly with the content
of the writing and using students' experience as a bridge from "personal"
to "academic" writing. A further bridge is based on the notion of
rhetorical structure. Students encounter this notion first through stories
written by themselves. They first write (in collaborative groups) stories
to illustrate a proverb which they have selected from a list. As they then
listen to each story, they are asked to identify the proverb (this ensures
that they are engaged communicatively with each other's texts). They are
then introduced to the idea of rhetorical structure as it is applied to the analysis of stories (see for example Hatch, 1992, pp. 165-174) and explore the extent to which their own stories have the structure which has been found to be typical in stories from various parts of the world (orientation, goal, problem, actions, resolution, coda). The exploration reveals two important factors: first, that actual stories contain these "typical" elements to varying degrees but also show a wide range of variation; and second, that the function of a story's rhetorical structure (whether "typical" or not) is to increase the effectiveness of the communication between writer and reader/listener, e.g. by giving necessary background, highlighting key features, providing recognisable elements, and so on. When the notion of rhetorical structure is later transferred from stories to academic essays, these same factors of potential variability and communicative effectiveness (as established through anticipatory role-taking and subsequent reader-response) continue to be emphasised. (For a more detailed description, see Littlewood, forthcoming.)

Within individual units of the course, we also attempt to establish close links between writing and other forms of communication, notably those involving oral interaction (c.f. Littlewood, 1994; Weissberg, 1994). Through such activity, students can create, explore and experiment with ideas and language, so that (adapting a phrase from Prabhu, 1987, p. 50) "borrowed language becomes increasingly their own".

Through the design of the course, then, the aim is to stimulate students to identify with their ideas, judge their readers' needs and develop a sense of ownership of their writing, so that they will engage as fully as possible with the act of communication and feel genuinely motivated to engage with their readers in a successful "journey through ideas". In this way it is hoped that they will develop insights into principles of effective writing which they can then apply in all conditions; that they can transfer these principles in as natural a way as possible into the writing of texts for academic purposes; and that they can thus integrate the expression of their own ideas with the conventions involved in writing successfully for an (L1 or L2) English-speaking academic community.
References


