Academic Literacy Acquisition Beyond Cultural Boundaries: Taking Academic English Writing as a Case

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Abstract. From the western point of view, language, literacy and culture are interrelated and cannot be separated from one another when minority students’ learning behaviors are studied. This study is designed to discuss the issue from another point of view of the minority students themselves. It is aimed at depicting, by the emic approach, how those students go beyond the cultural boundaries and achieve academic literacy despite the discrepancies. The author conducted this quasi-experimental research study in a Chinese university classroom of teaching academic English writing to see the possibility and extent of the Chinese students’ acculturation into English academic field.

Introduction

From the western point of view, language, literacy and culture are interrelated and cannot be separated from one another when minority students’ learning behaviors are studied. It is hypothesized that, due to the cultural and cognitive differences, those minority students may be confronted with greater difficulties in the process of their learning in a foreign or different cultural context. To facilitate their study, their cultural and linguistic background is considered to see if discrepancies exist and cause the hardships in learning and research. The results of the studies approved the hypothesis and made tentative suggestions accordingly. This study is designed to discuss the issue from another point of view of the minority students themselves. It is aimed at depicting, by the emic approach, how those students go beyond the cultural boundaries and achieve academic literacy despite the discrepancies. The author conducted this quasi-experimental research study in a Chinese university classroom of teaching academic English writing to see the possibility and extent of the Chinese students’ acculturation into English academic field.

Defining Literacy and Two Major Categories Related to the Study

Literacy

Literacy refers to the ability to read and write words in a standard language which enable the learners to communicate in the social or professional context. Traditional views about literacy pointed that it was paper-based, static, linear and two-dimensional reading and writing performance obtained from systematic school education through language curriculum and instruction [Lotherington & Jenson, 2011, p.226]. New trends suggested multimodality in defining literacy which implied that literacy was indeed social, unavoidably influenced by social factors, such as the cultural community where literacy acquisition was accomplished. Literacy education is conceived to be not merely confined in the classroom discourse but also extended to the everyday social life. Literacy is not limited to the ability of reading and writing but lays the foundation for professional or social exchanges. Thus, it involves social interaction, visual design, dynamic and collaborative text construction. The following two categories of literacy, namely emancipatory literacy and academic literacy are applied as the essential theoretical base to conceptualize the research study reported by this article.
**Emancipatory literacy.** Emancipatory literacy, as the explicit name for literacy or a more concrete term, has been suggested to have three dimensions [Freire & Macedo, 2003, p.354]:

A. Students have to become literate about their histories, experiences and the culture of their immediate environments.

B. Students must also appropriate those codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so they can transcend their own environments.

C. Students should generate consciousness about their comprehension of the world, their dreams of the world, their judgment of the world and in one word their presence in the world.

It is also suggested that between the first two dimensions exists an enormous tension while the third dimension of the students’ consciousness of their presence in the world is believed to be the solution to the problems caused by the tension. By the third dimension, Freire advises that students should have acquired the initiative to explore and understand the world, the inspirations about how the world should be or change for the better and their judgment made in accordance with their perceptions about the world and their consciousness generated through individual participatory involvement in the social practice.

The three dimensions theorize the current education and indicate the model for comprehending the education context or discourse. Students are required to be informed of the concurrences in the past and present, to recognize the knowledge or generate the principles to transcend the current world or accomplish the process of world transformation. During the process, students are self-motivated and passionate, as they realize the significance of self-esteem and sense of fulfillment. The model of interpreting successful education accommodates three factors: the individual experiences, the cultural codes and the students themselves. Experiences are enriched and inspired by the students’ initiatives to know the world, and vice versa, they are also relied on for further exploration and even transformation. The extent of the accomplishment is determined by the students themselves, specifically speaking, their perseverance, their comprehension power, their cognitive flexibility in working out solutions and their sense of social responsibility.

**Academic literacy.** Academic literacy refers to the students’ ability of academic reading and writing [Cumming, 2013], involving a much more complex cognitive process in acquiring the literacy, but the learning behaviors are still characterized by the three dimensions mentioned above. Some equivalences need to be recognized between the general model and this case of academic literacy. Concerning this, Cumming states three dimensions of learning literacy in the context of cultural and linguistic diversity:

[a] heuristic search strategies involving language switching for choices of words and phrases while composing,

[b] expressions of personal identity when writing for specific discourse communities,

[c] and reciprocal modeling during dynamic assessments of writing and reading.

From the dimensions, three factors can also be selected: codes of language use, the personal identity and discourse communities. More inclusively, the third dimension stressed the importance of dynamic or interactive associations between the three factors when the assessment is conducted.

During the classroom teaching research, the model for academic literacy has been applied in designing the teaching methodology by integrating other more direct and specific theories in terms of academic English writing. The research has been conducted in the span of almost one year. The post-research reflection and reporting take another two years or even a little longer, during which social interactions between the people inside and outside of the study have been on and off until currently, this paper takes its shape.

**The Methodological Approach**

The study is designed firstly on the basis of the goal of general education, i.e. developing students’ critical thinking; secondly, it is well-informed and guided by the model of emancipatory literacy and subsequently the model of academic literacy; lastly, it is motivated and inspired by theories and experiences in the field of applied linguistics. Specifically speaking, this study is aimed at
constructing the pedagogy of academic English writing for the purpose of developing critical thinking. The purpose was accomplished by first conceptualizing critical thinking to clarify specific knowledge and skills needed. Based upon the conceptualization, a quasi-experimental study [Johnson & Christensen, 2008] was designed to examine how students’ critical thinking was developed by the constructed pedagogy of academic English writing. Data was analyzed by the approach of multiple regression and it was found that disciplinary knowledge, knowledge about genres, writing process, discourse conventions and evaluation of the papers’ logical organizations are the main factors most associated with the holistic assessment of students’ papers.

**Theoretical conceptualization.** Do Major theories about Academic English Writing appear to be random unless we locate them in a theoretical framework. Such a project was partially accomplished by a multiple case study conducted to explore and construct the conceptual framework of expertise about academic writing needed by different work sites outside schools [Beaufort, 1999]. In 2004, Beaufort used the same framework as the analysis tool to conduct another single case longitudinal study. The purpose of the research was to find out how the proficiency of Academic English Writing got developed during the four-year college study. At the same time, the effectiveness of the conceptual framework for analyzing an empirical study was also testified and the interpretation of the framework was enriched [Beaufort, 2004]. Since the context of the framework construction was outside the university in the work units, when the same framework was used inside the university, some additional information was identified to be very significant but left out in the original framework. That was critical thinking or critical skills as an important educational goal. I was upset by this enrichment as the concept of critical think had been carefully and rather thoroughly examined in one of my articles developed out of my dissertation [Gao, 2012a]. The article [Gao, 2012b] led me to the conclusion that critical thinking is such a complex and umbrella concept that includes three other equally overarching sub-concepts: attitude, knowledge and skills [Watson & Glaser,1964].

**Attitude** [curious and persistent inquiry + integrity value],
**Knowledge** [writing expertise framework] and
**Skills** [research methodological or procedural knowledge]

**Data analysis and research results.** Students’ compositions were assessed based upon the specific aspects of the theoretical framework and scored respectively. The resulting scores were analyzed by SPSS both descriptively and inferentially. The descriptive statistical process was applied to illustrate how students’ critical thinking had been developed while the inferential statistical process was conducted to infer whether there was the difference between male and female students’ critical thinking development. Multiple regression analysis [Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 2003; Carver, 2010] was accomplished to rank all the aspects according to the degree of their respective significance to developing critical thinking.

When evaluating students’ papers, the author found that students were quite good at analyzing and synthesizing the existing research literature. The corresponding section was written concisely and logically, so was their linguistic competence in organizing their logical ideas. Most of the students could finish a paper in more than 2000 words. A number of the students were able to construct a rational framework with a clear research purpose and conclude the paper with proper suggestions or discussions to achieve their research purposes. A greater number of students had some difficulties in describing the research methodological process probably due to the fact that they were unable to be fully aware of how research should be accomplished, i.e. the research methodology. On the whole, papers could be organized in the way that academic reports are usually written, which means that they were already partially aware of the importance of the research process. Students’ linguistic competence to the greatest extent affected the writing quality, better linguistic competence, more capable of organizing ideas into a coherent paper. Another important factor is the students’ attitudes towards the research and writing task: students with integrated or honest beliefs and attitudes tend to finish the paper with high quality. In terms of research methodological description, male students were less careful than females possibly due to their different preferences for the findings rather than
the processes [i.e. How to cite in the main body and how to arrange the references]. Additionally, how to separate the research results and discussion section was not clearly manifested in some of the papers. All of the above reflections were derived from the holistic assessment of the papers.

The multiple regression analysis produced the following models to illustrate how significant each of the factors was to writing academic papers:

**Academic attitudes and knowledge frameworks:**

\[ Y_{hol} = 25.35 + 0.17X_{unbiased} + 0.03X_{integrity} + 0.29X_{genre} + 0.17X_{discourse} + 0.08X_{subject} + 0.04X_{rhetorical} + 0.20X_{process} \]

**Research Methodology:**

\[ Y_{hol} = 30.68 - 0.08X_{abstract} + 0.15X_{introduction} + 0.15X_{methods} - 0.09X_{results} - 0.12X_{discussion} + 0.96X_{evaluation} \]

It can be inferred from the models that knowledge about genres, the writing process, discourse and holistic evaluation according to the quality of the logical organization. If academic attitudes, knowledge and skills were considered as three major factors in academic paper writing, another model was produced by the multiple regression analysis:

\[ Y_{hol} = 25.50 + 0.15X_{attitude} + 0.72X_{knowledge} + 0.11X_{skills} \]

which indicated that knowledge was the most important factor in deciding students’ achievements of academic paper writing.

**Pedagogical Discussions**

Students have been greatly engaged in the study, which can be shown by their classroom participation and the final project reports they have finished on their own. Students also encountered many difficulties. One of the most prominent barriers is their confidence in their accomplishing of the project, or in another word, their belief about their capacity in writing an English paper of about 2000 words. A few students paused at the end of the academic year when the study has been going on, saying that they were not sure about if it was appropriate to write the way they did though they really had some ideas to take down. My suggestion to them was to write down what was in their minds and try to make their thoughts reasonable and coherent with correct English. One of the students, finally, did a wonderful job by handing in a well-written essay of more than 3000 words concerning financial issues. To interpret the phenomenon, I would like to cite the initial model in this article suggested by Freire, specifically speaking, the third dimension, i.e. Students’ individual consciousness which enables them to work harder to fulfill their dreams and self-value, or to do what they think worthwhile. Their essays may not be very academic or professional but they are very well on their way towards the direction.

As far as language choices are concerned, academic word lists and syntax were collectively studied by applying some well-developed theories to compiling the teaching materials. Genre knowledge is more complex but necessary to construct the framework of the composition: different genres entail different logical structures to distinguish one from another. Chinese students are sometimes unclear about the differences between prose and narration. The solution to this problem is the identification of respective schematic features of the two genres. Narratives usually are unfolded by exposing the logical structure of the story or the process of the story that happens: time, character, setting, plot, climax and resolution. Knowledge about discourse conventions is as complex as those of the above since discourse conventions are usually defined by different academic discourse communities to achieve format consistency in their community publications. Occasionally, the format may mean differently from different perspectives, so some instructions need here to clarify the rationale for the paper format, which even the instructor gets totally confused about it. Once the students were well informed of the rationale, willingness to editing the paper accordingly prevailed.

What is the most appealing to the students is the writing process and the training of composing strategies. Group work is found to be very popular even among the Chinese college students probably due to the Chinese instructor present in the classroom who should be more closely related to them or due to the empathy aroused by cultural agreement between the students and the instructor which motivates students to follow the instructor’s lead more willingly. This can partially explain the large number of Chinese English teachers who are working in China as English educators or professionals.
Reversely, it can also account for the importance of being empathetic or just patient in foreign language teaching regardless of their cultural identity.

To close this discussion about acquiring academic literacy beyond cultural boundaries, I would like to admit that a great sense of achievement has been inspired by the students’ engagement in this study and their initiatives to do something more complex and different, by their enthusiasm to spend their spare time to read the textbooks and journal articles and by their patience to be with me all the way down the road. The sense of the achievement is also derived from the pieces of the teaching materials compiled by editing students’ compositions and papers. Above these, personal fulfillment of years of expectations to explore the possibilities of composing a beautiful English piece more fluently causes the greatest sense of success and fills in gaps in this field personally and professionally. Hopefully, more and more people who have the same expectations or demands may have access to these materials I have compiled and found them useful in their teaching of English compositions, even beyond cultural boundaries.

References