



## “There and Back Again” in the Writing Classroom: A Graduate Student’s Recursive Journey Through Pedagogical Research and Theory Development

This article discusses my (recursive) process of theory building and the relationship between research, teaching, and theory development for graduate students. It shows how graduate students can re-shape their conceptual frameworks not only through course work, but also through researching classes they teach. Specifically, while analyzing the intersection of modality, evidence, and argument in my students’ writing, I began to adopt Bakhtinian (1981) theory of dialogic voicing and appropriation as a framework through which to approach writing development. I examine the influences of curriculum, policy, citation, and plagiarism on student writing and conclude with discussing the changes in my teaching practices.

### Introduction

The following excerpt is taken from an essay by my student, Alex, who was arguing the case for strong parental influence on young adults.<sup>1</sup>

People at younger age trust their parents and *always* ask for their advice when they face difficult situations in their lives. For instance, when they need an advice about a job interview, young people *will* first ask their parents. ... And parents *will* give answer them to their questions. ... Convinced by their parents, their children *will* follow their advice and in doing so, they *will* try to slowly adjust their behavior [italics added].

Alex speaks in absolutes and makes assertive claims based on hypothetical evidence, which is uncharacteristic of academic writing. Yet this essay is not exceptional and reflects the problem that occurs when freshman undergraduate second language and multilingual writers are given the precarious task of developing their language and academic writing abilities while at the same time showing they can argue a point and support it with evidence. They have to balance between being novice writers and knowing thinkers and “balance between

exerting ‘authority’ ... and displaying ‘humility’” (Lee, 2010, p. 202). The result, at times, is a combination of evidence, language, and argument that does not align with academic writing conventions. Working with students such as Alex prompted me to do research on my student essays, which has led to changes in my theories toward language development and teaching.

This article is a reflection on my experience doing research in my advanced reading and writing course for freshman “nonnative speakers” (some arguably are “native” speakers) of English and how graduate students can build upon and develop theoretical constructs through performing research, which can in turn influence curriculum-development decisions.

What brought me to the place of doing this classroom research was a result of not one graduate-level Linguistics course, but a combination of facts, methods, theoretical frameworks, and previous research (learned in a variety of courses and independent study) that together formed a synergistic understanding of language development and pedagogical practices. This includes looking at research methods such as ethnography and discourse analysis, critically analyzing language policy and institutional design and power, and second-language writing development. With that groundwork as a starting point, I analyzed my students’ essays and reflected on the results. Through this process, I developed new perspectives on language learning and research methodologies, which I then transformed into pedagogical practice. The process was not entirely a linear, unidirectional sequence of theory-research-practice, but a recursive one in which I developed a few solid theoretical frameworks that have influenced my teaching and research on writing development by figuring out “what was going on” in my classroom.

There is an overarching theoretical framework that I have now adopted in my approach to teaching and analyzing academic writing; subsumed in this framework is another concept regarding academic writing and a methodological approach to written discourse analysis, both of which have been developed during the process of this research project. The overarching framework adopts the Bakhtinian theory of language as inherently dialogic and something we appropriate (1981, 1986). That is, words always reference some other word or person and are “populated by intentions” of others (1981, p. 293). Bakhtin also believed that people learn and appropriate language through making it “one’s own” (1981, p. 293). Students must appropriate academic language and make it their own, and this is likely done through the process of bringing in outside sources. The new theoretical methodology I started to employ, appraisal theory (Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005), uses Bakhtinian theory of dialogism as its starting point for how to analyze written discourse. Another way Bakhtinian theory applies to academic writing are the dialogues occurring around a written text, such as between the reader and writer and the cited researchers within the text and the writer. These theories will be discussed, as well as how they connect to language learning and students such as Alex, who struggle with using evidence and modality when writing argumentative essays. Had I not gone through this process of analyzing student essays, I may not have encountered and adopted these concepts and methodology.

## **The Research Project:**

### **The Intersection of Modality, Evidence, and Argument**

The writing course that is the focus of this article is mandatory for students who have failed the Analytical Writing Placement Exam (AWPE) and whose writing consists of linguistic features associated with students working on written English language development. These freshmen receive intensive grammar instruction along with a significant amount of reading, writing, and some rhetorical analysis. The essays have not required or encouraged students to use outside sources. Students come with a variety of written English-language skills and vary from US-born bilinguals to international students.

Before starting my research project, I had noticed that my students often struggle to argue a point and use evidence to support their claims, yet I did not have the time to closely look at their essays in terms of patterns in linguistic features and evidence. Fortunately, I took a seminar on second language writing, in which as a final project I was tasked with doing a small research project on second language writing. Remembering the recurring problem, I decided to look at my students' writing, partially out of circumstance (I had the essays and student permission) and curiosity (I wanted to really closely analyze their writing).

I employed discourse analysis of their essays using appraisal theory and evaluation (Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin and White, 2005), the aforementioned discourse analytic framework based on Bakhtinian concepts; it looks at how people denote opinion, engage readers, and create argument through linguistic features. I had been introduced to this methodology during an earlier research project by my major professor and thought it was befitting of the data and questions I had. In my results, I found a polarized use of modals in conjunction with evidence, which resulted in either strong or weak body paragraphs. On one end, some students (such as Alex) used absolute modals and adverbs such as *will* and *always* when discussing hypothetical examples. On the other end, some students used more tentative modals and adverbs such as *can* and *often* and they drew upon examples from outside sources.

The latter type aligns more closely to academic writing and is stronger overall. For example, one student, Subotai, discussed her arguments in terms of what "can" happen and "often" occurs and incorporated research and articles. What mitigating modality emphasizes is that authors open the dialogue with the reader by indicating that other points of view are possible (Martin & White, 2005). The use of the (unsolicited) outside sources also opens dialogue among scholars and experts, which serves to strengthen these students' claims. In effect, students such as Subotai were writing in a sophisticated, academic manner and knew how to use modals and adverbs in conjunction with outside sources to effectively prove their point.

However, not all students wrote like Subotai. Some drew upon hypothetical and very tentative evidence (but keep in mind this is the type of evidence they were encouraged to use). And unfortunately, to make matters worse, they discussed these examples in terms of absolute assuredness, using modals and adverbs such as *will* and *always*. But I do not think this type of writing was all

that unsolicited. In the case of Alex's paragraph, he was in many ways doing what he was told: making an argument and supporting it with the type of evidence the course wanted.

Through the process of analyzing my students' essays as a data set, I realized some students were having problems not only with language use, such as modals, but also with use of evidence and argumentation. This process also made me reflect on *why* students wrote this way and what factors influenced them, including my own teaching practices and curriculum design.

### **Effects of Course Design and Instruction on Student Essays: The Role of Curricular Policy, Plagiarism, and Grammar Instruction**

I came to two broader conclusions regarding the factors influencing why my students wrote like Alex. The first came through thinking about institutional policies, course design, and the writing trajectory of these students and how these policies affect student writing. Students who pass my class are required to take another writing course in which they take the AWPE (Analytical Writing Placement Exam) as their final exam. In the past, they had to pass this exam to pass the class. Fortunately, in 2008 that rule was removed, though students still take the AWPE as their final (Leonard, 2011). When the stakes were high, my writing course was partially seen as preparing students to retake the exam they had failed. Because the exam requires students to draw upon general observations and hypothetical evidence, it was befitting to require that of them in the essays they wrote in my class. However, the curriculum in my course regarding evidence has not changed.

The second factor relates to issues of citation, incorporation of outside sources, and plagiarism—a conclusion I came to while taking a seminar on second language writing and reading about related controversies, including issues of plagiarism (Casanave, 2007). The connection itself is twofold: There are assumed, theoretical assumptions that written academic language development can be divorced from using outside sources and the two can be learned independently of another. The other connection is the idea that incorporating outside sources requires too much time commitment because time must be devoted to teaching citation and working on preventing plagiarism. And because students were placed in my class because of linguistic features, the emphasis needed to be on grammar (and not engaging in outside sources). However, I began to question the validity of both these assumptions. Furthermore, although plagiarism is a controversial and pervasive issue (see Bloch, 2012, and Pecorari, 2008, for a thorough discussion), academic writing is founded upon incorporation of outside sources. And most of my students were not doing this because the curriculum was designed for them not to, thus keeping them from engaging in a practice central to their academic success.

### **Developing Theoretical Perspectives: Appropriating Language Through Engaging Outside Sources and the Myth of Assertive Writing and Modality**

After analyzing the student essays, connecting the results to potential fac-

tors influencing the student essays, and reading literature, my viewpoint on teaching writing and language learning was transformed. It is not so much that my theoretical perspectives have changed course but that they have been substantially added to and developed, filling in a space that was previously not occupied. While doing this research I was reintroduced to Bakhtinian theory and began to study it in depth along with the literature that connects it to writing development. I found it to be a useful framework through which to understand language development and my role as an instructor. For one, language is “out there” and we appropriate it through engaging with it, including the language of texts. The further connection with writing is recognizing that academic texts are full of “conversations” (by being heteroglossic), and students need to begin crafting writing that creates a dialogue through effectively including their own voice(s) with those of others, including scholars and readers. But I also became familiar with a useful and effective manner through which to analyze language in texts, such as modals, through appraisal theory (Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005). These new understandings have influenced my outlook on academic language development along two lines: the role of outside sources in language and academic writing development and the intersection of modality with sources and evidence.

First, in college, students must learn academic language from somewhere and the location of such language often lies in academic texts. They need to practice incorporating outside sources from these texts, not only so they become socialized into the academic writing genre but also so they can learn the language needed to be part of the academic community. Many have argued that working with outside texts, manipulating them, discussing them, framing them, and paraphrasing them helps lead to language development and in fact may be a step in language development, known as patchwriting (Howard, 1995; Pecorari, 2003). Rather than leaving this for a later class, students need to begin practice on a difficult task early (Schuermann, 2008), especially considering that this is struggle for many undergraduate and graduate students (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006; Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Hayes & Introna, 2005; Pecorari, 2008). It is important to expose students to using outside sources and evidence early on, even at the risk of “not getting it right,” or unintentionally plagiarizing.

The second way my outlook was transformed relates to the dialogic aspect of Bakhtinian theory and how writers engage readers and persuade them, partially through linguistic features such as modals. My student Alex fell short of persuading his reader when he closed off the dialogue by using absolute modality and also offering little concrete evidence. However, I believe he was following a groundless yet perpetuated writing myth that students (always) need to make their writing assertive (Hyland, 2008). Argument and stance are essential to academic writing, but there are many factors involved in making assertions, such as position, power, and evidence (Hyland, 1994). Modality is indicative of one’s stance and research has found that strong freshman essays use mitigating modals such as *can* whereas C and D essays show “stronger definiteness,” much like Alex’s (Mei & Allison, 2005, p. 119). And yet I was not teaching modals in

relation to outside sources or to engaging the reader or to the nuances of argument and assertion in writing.

Realizing the dialogic nature of writing and language development helped me transform the way I think about teaching grammar and evidence in writing. Rather than being discrete concepts, it is the intersection of language (modals), argument, and incorporation of outside sources that needs to be taught in classes. And it is this intersection that I have begun to address in my writing courses.

### **Implementing Change in the Classroom:**

#### **Teaching Modality, Evidence, and Incorporation of Outside Sources**

With the new understanding that students need to learn the grammar and language as it is situated in conjunction with discussing outside sources, evidence, and argument, I have made three major changes to my teaching. First, regarding the way I teach modals, my focus typically has been on mastering the conjugation rules and many functions of all 10 modals in the grammar book. What I have done now is spend time looking at sample body paragraphs, highlighting the modals used, what they express in terms of certainty, and how this relates to the evidence and examples used. We discuss the myth of making one's writing assertive and students have responded by expressing general understanding about weak evidence, but for many of them focusing on the intersection of modals, argument, and proof is new. Some have been surprised by the need to *not* make sweeping statements or use absolute modality.

In alignment with having students begin to think about finding examples based on research, facts, or expert opinions, I also have started requiring students to incorporate at least one newspaper article in their essays because it is relatively low stakes but has them engage outside sources. Finding articles has helped students get acquainted with academic research and familiarize them with the library databases. In an effort to let students "try out" incorporating outside sources, I do not require a certain method of incorporation such as direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary, though we discuss their rhetorical values after drafts are written.

Last, I have also spent significantly more time than before focusing on paraphrasing so that students practice understanding a text, manipulating language, and reflecting on specific aspects of language such as rephrasing, word choice, and sentence structure. This is also to allow students space for appropriation of academic language from the texts they are paraphrasing and for making it their own (Bakhtin, 1981). As a result, we have discussed the line between plagiarism, patchwriting, and legitimate paraphrasing—a line that can be drawn only by focusing on specific linguistic features such as word choice and sentence structure.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching, researching, and theory building has been a recursive practice and I am still trying out new approaches to teaching grammar and helping students develop their academic writing skills. Through taking courses and reading literature during my time in the program, my ideas about language

learning, writing development, and pedagogy have changed. But they have done so in conjunction with teaching writing and researching. It has been a recursive process of assessing language-learning theories in practice, identifying issues and researching them, and then returning to the literature to understand perspectives and theories on the issues. Had I not performed research on my students' essays, I doubt I would have adopted the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism and appropriation and seen it as a useful framework through which to approach language learning and analysis of writing.

Teaching while being a graduate student and researcher has not only helped me develop my teaching skills but also my research. In turn, my research has influenced my teaching, and thus it might be considered a form of "action research." This has had the twofold benefit of allowing me to investigate a problem in the classroom and satisfy my expectations as a researcher. This paper also shows the synergism that teaching and research can create, especially when one's research focuses on education and learning. This is helpful considering that many PhD students may find a disconnect between what they are researching and what they do to employ themselves through school. It is also exciting considering the research that found graduate students who taught classes created more informed experimental design and research than graduate students who did not teach or TA (Feldon et al., 2011).

### **Author**

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### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonym. All student names are pseudonyms.

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