

Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing as a Mode of Communication

Upon entering university, students engage in rhetorical situations “located in research institution” in which they have to produce written texts, particularly, in the academic essay genre (Giltrow, 2002, p. 27). The new rhetorical genre studies [as part of the social theory of writing] (Bakhtin, 1986; Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Miller, 1984/1994) suggests that student writers in academia are situated in rhetorical situations to which they have to provide written responses, academic genres. In other words, student writers respond to socially accepted motives in academia and participate in academic discourse community through writing. When writing the academic essays, students use the literature, develop their own ideas and research directions and position themselves in the essay; they engage in a silent scholarly communication through writing. The question is, what are the students' perspectives on academic writing?

In this study I intend to use the new rhetorical genre studies [as being part of the social view of writing] to examine students' perceptions of academic writing as a mode of communication in academia. I want to discover to what extent students perceive their writing as a medium through which they can engage in academic discourse, and whether they consider themselves members of academic discourse community.

In this paper, first I will discuss two studies that seem to have examined comparable research issues. Then, I will define the theoretical framework and methodology that includes interviews with four students in a masters' program and analyzing their academic essays. I have identified four main themes in the interviews that will be discussed. Then, four textual features in the students' academic essays, which are discipline specific terms, nominal style, citations and discursive "I", will be examined. Finally, after discussing the findings and conclusion, I will present implications of the study.

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

In my search for the resources I found two studies in which the researchers have investigated similar research issues as in this study. Gambell (1987) investigated university Education students' "attitudes toward their own writing and how they go about writing for academic purposes" (p. 1). He asked 48 elementary education preservice teachers in their 2nd and 3rd year to provide detailed responses to eight questions about their problems with writing, their attitudes toward writing and processes involved in writing. He found that most students see writing an enjoyable but a difficult task because of 1) their inability to conceptualize an audience, 2) not being able to express their own opinions or ideas and 3) lack of understanding of the process approach to writing. Gambell's study provides information about students' perspective toward academic writing from a process-based view of writing that focuses on student individual involvement in the writing process in academia. The study focused on students' involvement in the writing process including narrowing down a topic, researching

a topic, proofreading, editing etc. without taking into account the social context in which writing occurs.

Nelson (1990) having adopted a social view of writing, examined the many factors involved in how students interpret and respond to academic writing tasks as well as how students' interpretations differ from instructors' intentions. Her main findings were: 1) students rely on different situational and individual resources to respond to a writing task; 2) they differ in the extent to which they drew from those resources. Her research issue is in fact the research tool that I intend to use in this study: through interviewing students and eliciting how they interpret and respond to a specific writing task, essay writing, I intend to explore their perceptions of academic writing as a mode of communication in academia; the research issue that none of the above mentioned studies have investigated.

As mentioned above, the main theoretical framework adopted for this study is the social view of writing as represented by the concept of genre in new rhetorical genre studies as discussed by Carolyn Miller who defines genre as "social action" in response to recurrent rhetorical situation (as cited in Dias et al. 1999, p. 20). This theoretical framework suggests that writing is not a mere involvement of writers in the writing process of producing a text, but an action performed by writers as a response to a communicative need or motive that is an integral part of the rhetorical situation in which writing occurs. The rhetorical situation comprises the writer, the purpose of writing, the context, the audience or the readers to whom the written text is directed, etc. The notion of addressee as discussed by Bakhtin (1986) as well as Swales' (1990) discussion of discourse

community are the theoretical concepts I have taken into account. Swale “locates genres within discourse communities”(as cited in Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 7). According to Swales (1990) academic discourse community not only has a “set of goals”, “specific lexis”, “novices”, “experts’ etc., but also specific genres to accomplish its communicative purposes (p. 24-27). Also for the analysis of the textual features of the academic essay genre I have made use of Giltrow’s discussion (2002) of these features in her book “Academic Writing: writing and reading in the disciplines”.

Taking into account these theoretical notions, I intend to learn about the students’ perceptions of academic writing, specifically academic essay writing.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative exploratory small-scale project is based on 20-30 minute interviews using seven open-ended questions (Appendix A) that were tape-recorded. In addition to the interview analysis, I have conducted textual analysis of the final drafts of the first essays that the study participants have written in the master’s program. In the textual analysis, I have focused on some of the genre specific features of an academic essay, which are discipline specific terms, nominal style, citations and discursive “I”.

The study participants include two male and two female students in their second semester of the master's program in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies (SLALS) at Carleton University. The participants have been recruited individually and on the volunteer basis. For conducting this

project I have received the ethics committee approval and offered the participants anonymity by using pseudonyms that are Jack, Sara, Peter and Mary.

An important point should be mentioned that since all the participants have been in the SLALS program, they have had some tacit or even explicit knowledge about the social view of writing that probably has affected the research findings; students in other disciplines may have completely different perceptions of academic writing.

Interview analysis

While listening to the interviews for several times I realized that many of the concepts discussed in the interviews were interrelated. Therefore, I have decided to discuss the main themes in the interviews rather than answers to each single question. The four themes in the interviews are: 1) students' social motive to write, 2) rhetorical situation and the writing process, 3) students' sense of the addressee and 4) students' sense of belonging to academia.

1. Students' social motive to write

Social motive as defined by Miller (1994) is an "objectified social need" (p. 30). In academia social motive refers to the needs that are defined and accepted by academic discourse community. This community according to Swales (1990) has a "set of goals", "specific lexis", "novices' as well as "experts', etc., and most importantly, specific genres to accomplish communicative purposes (p. 24-27)

In academia, writing tasks are designed as part of the course structure to fulfill certain purposes. In the study participants' point of view the social motive to

write the essays is learning and grasping some concepts. As Freedman (1996) has noted “most discipline-specific written arguments produced by students in school or a university are epistemic” (p. 92). That is, students are dealing with interpreting knowledge that is presented in the literature, thinking about it, synthesizing it and finally learning it through presenting their own understanding of it in writing. Through writing students do not produce new knowledge; rather as they mention in the interviews, they demonstrate to the instructors that they have learned the concepts covered in the course, fulfilled the course requirements, presented their own opinions and structure their own thoughts.

For example, Sara believes that the essay shows that the student is “able to take a lot of literature that is there and synthesize it into an argument” and present his or her opinion. Peter thinks that writing is “a learning process” in which the student fulfills the course requirement. In Mary’s point of view, through writing an essay, the students can “study a topic in grater detail”. For Jack who has had a course in rhetorical genre studies and thus has some explicit knowledge about my research issue, writing is not just “for the purpose of the professor”, but also a way through which he can share with the professor that he can write within the discipline. Writing for him is “communication” which “involves genre, writing within the disciplinary community”.

Interviews suggest that the students’ interpretation and enactment of the writing task depend on many contextual factors, especially, the instructor’s lectures and feedback, the assigned readings and the literature used for writing the paper. These factors will be discussed in the next section.

2. Rhetorical situations and the writing process

Interviews demonstrate that the study participants' interpretation of the rhetorical situation and their actions realized in the essays have been affected by various contextual factors. The main factors that have been mentioned in the interviews are the instructor's explanation of the required writing task, the assigned readings in the course and the instructor's lectures. Interviews suggest that all these factors have had a crucial effect on the stages involved in the writing process starting from choosing the topic to writing the final draft.

According to the interviews all the study participants started the writing process having a broad topic in their minds, a topic in which they were interested and could easily take positions and present their ideas. Their choice of topic was affected by instructors' expectations and explanations of the required paper, the assigned readings and the instructors' lectures. Interpreting all these factors, students have responded to the rhetorical situation and started the writing process.

In his interview Jack explains that in order to clarify his ideas about the topic, he has talked to his fellow students and his professor to elicit "some concepts or ideas" that he may want to write about. On the other hand, Sara has started the writing process with a brainstorming session on the topic as a way to organize her thoughts. Mary has had a different strategy: starting with a "raw decision on a topic", then reading the literature and visiting the instructor "to ask for guidance" and to make the topic more specific. Finally, Peter begins with a

broad topic and starts reading to “get more in-depth information, background information” about it.

Doing research and lots of reading are two points being emphasized by the study participants. Interviews suggest that reading the literature helps the students to narrow down their topic, direct their own thoughts, develop an outline for their papers and find relevant literature to support their own ideas and arguments. Sara does “some quick searches to find concepts related to the topic, ways to fit them into the topic” and her “stance”. On the other hand, Jack develops a “particular approach to the paper” as he starts reading the literature; reading makes him “diverge at a particular direction”. He writes down concepts related to his topic found in the resources and tries to incorporate them into his paper. Peter makes notes as a way to understand the concepts. Mary develops “sort of an outline and an idea” of what she wants to show in her paper while reading and writing.

The study participants’ explanations suggest that while reading and writing, they are constantly thinking about their topics and what they wanted to say. They have gone through editing and rephrasing as a way for better expression. Based on the interviews it can be said that writing for students has been a complex process of thinking, evaluating published scholars’ ideas and developing a stance and presenting their own ideas considering the instructor as the sole reader. The notion of addressee or reader mentioned by all the students will be discussed in the following section

3. Students’ sense of the addressee

The participants' perceptions of the addressee are that of a single reader, the instructor who not only determines their choice of topic for the essay and the writing style, but also influences the way they argue and position themselves in the essays. Almost all the study participants have stated that they have partially tacit and partially explicit knowledge of their reader who is the instructor to whom they direct their essays. For example, Peter has a "subconscious knowledge" of his professor and the "professor's expectations". Sara believes that knowing the instructor "is kind of feel", and that she gets it intuitively. According to Giltrow, these expressions convey the impression that when students are writing they can not see their audience in front of them, but often they know much about the audience (as cited in Govier, 1996).

The study participants have got this knowledge of the audience through the instructors' explicit explanation of the required paper and classroom discursive context including assigned reading and the instructors' lectures and feedback. Knowledge of the audience has provided them with the hints to find a topic and to make their stance in the paper and also with the conventions of academic genre to follow. For both Peter and Jack knowing the professor as the "single reader" helps them to determine the style of their papers. Also this knowledge determines Jack's paper "with respect to conventions of writing", "regularities" such as using "I" and following American Psychological Association (APA) format. On the other hand, "researching what professors have written themselves" helps Sara to "see what kind of style they are interested in" and find out if her topic is the instructor's main research interest. This knowledge, as she

has explained, helps her argument through her reader so that she could “take a strong stance”. Her statement probably suggests that “the writer can use particular knowledge of the reader’s beliefs, abilities and interests so as to construct an argument likely to be understood and accepted by the reader” (Govier, 1996, p. 80).

4. Students’ sense of belonging to academia

The last and most important theme brought up in the interviews is that of the students’ sense of belonging to the academic discourse community through writing an academic essay. The study participants have used academic essay genres to respond to the social motive that is learning; they do not consider themselves as experts in academic discourse community.

All the study participants have the idea or feeling of not being at the center of academic discourse community. Jack believes that he has to “exist within the discipline probably for practice for a period of time” to become a full member. He thinks that he is “still a student progressing”; he is “writing at graduate level discourse community” but he is “not part of the actual linguistics academic discourse community”. In his point of view, being a member of a disciplinary discourse community implies being “confident and professional within the discourse community” and having social, lexical and structural knowledge. However, he explains that, based on Swales, he is a novice, so he is part of this academic discourse community.

Sara emphasizes that “definitely” she is not in the “center” of academic discourse community. She adds that she is “more of an observer than a

participant” she never speaks “with any one else about that except fellow students”. She mentions that she is in “academic discourse, academic institution”, that helps her to shape her ideas for what she writes “but then it stops” because the reader is just the professor.

Peter stresses that he is not “a full member yet” and he is “becoming a member of discourse community” because he is “still learning”. He mentions an interesting point that reveals what he means by “becoming a member”. He states that when he reads what he has already written himself, he gets excited because a year ago he could not understand that concept and now he has written that concept.

Mary believes that she is not a member of academia yet because her paper “has only been read by one professor”. She adds that her paper might have had some effect on the instructor’s “future teaching or research”, but it is “such a minimal impact” and it has not really contributed to the student’s field of study.

All these opinions resonate with Ivanic’s (1998) argument that “the task of writing an essay that has been assigned and will be assessed by a tutor, positions writers as students rather than as contributors”(p. 297). In other words students are learners rather than researchers; they do not contribute to knowledge construction. According to Ivanic (1998), writing an essay for assessment places the student writers “as apprentices on the margins of community membership” (p. 297) and such writers “may see themselves as learners rather than researchers” (Giltrow, 2002, p. 27).

Text analysis

The textual features of an academic essay genre that I have analyzed are discipline specific terms, nominal style, discursive “I” and citations. For analyzing these features I have taken into account Giltrow’s (2002) discussion of these textual features as a constituent part of an academic essay genre.

Discipline specific terms

The most explicit feature in the essays is discipline specific terms that are understandable and frequently used in Applied Language Studies. In other words, discipline specific terms such as *genre*, *linguistic competence*, *contrastive analysis hypothesis* and *intake* characterize the academic essay genres produced in Applied Language Studies (Freedman, 1996).

The study participants’ use of these terms without explaining them conveys the impression that the study participants as part of their practical knowledge of the genre, have considered these terms as “presupposed shared knowledge” between themselves and the instructor who is a full-fledged member of the disciplinary discourse (Ivanic, 1998, p. 302). According to Ivanic (1998), using these terms without explaining them in most of the cases suggest that the student writers have adopted the role of contributors to academia rather than “a student role” or learner role (p. 297). As mentioned above, students do not usually produce new knowledge, but reproduce the knowledge to demonstrate their learning.

Discipline specific terms reflect the practice of the discourse community in which students are involved. They may not consider themselves as the real

members of their disciplinary community, but “the very wording of the facts and concepts students must absorb derives from research practice; this wording represents research communities’ beliefs and their members’ shared techniques for interpreting the world” (Giltrow, 2002, p. 27). In other words, discipline specific terms convey an impression that students have learned the concepts shared in their disciplinary discourse community and can demonstrate their learning through an academic genre accepted in the academic discourse community.

Nominal style

Nominal style refers to the use of noun phrases that may impose a high cognitive load on the reader and even distort the communication between the reader and the writer. All the students have used noun phrases such as “teacher talk”, “vocabulary items”, “foreigner talk”, “community changes”, “mother tongue” and “grammar knowledge”, the majority of which are likely to be easy to understand for the instructors since they are members of the disciplinary discourse community. However, a few noun phrases are more complex such as “sponsorship marketing opportunity guide” and “private funding application texts” that still seem to be understandable in the context.

Students’ avoidance of using big noun phrases as an evidence of “plain writing” suggests that they have intended to prevent ambiguity on the part of the readers whom they have probably considered as a “socio-cognitive being” to whom they want to communicate (Giltrow, 2002, p. 219). Therefore, the readers are not likely to have “trouble with a heavily nominal style” (Giltrow, 2002, p. 219). By providing an effective textual context, they might have helped the

instructors in essay evaluation. In addition, since, as it becomes apparent from the interviews, writing has a learning function in which students are presenting their understanding of the knowledge, they have probably used simple noun phrases as a way for their own better understanding of the concepts indeed.

Discursive “I”

Discursive “I” is another feature found in scholarly writing. According to Ivanic (1998), the use of first person suggests the contributor role of students in the discourse community rather than their “student role” (p. 301). Discursive “I” demonstrates the writer’s “subjectivity” and “responsibility” for “knowledge claims and beliefs” (p. 308).

All the study participants except Peter have used discursive “I” in their essays. Peter’s avoidance of the first person suggests his “relatively objective view of knowledge-making” and that he is not “personally involved” in what he is writing about (Ivanic, 1998, pp. 272-273); he seems to be distinct from his subject of study.

In all the essays I analyzed discursive “I” is followed by verbs such as *suggest, propose, disagree, believe, define*, which refer to some “discourse action” (cf, Giltrow, 2002, p.235). Using these verbs, student writers are positioning themselves, making arguments as well as “helping readers manage the contents of their mental desktop” (p. 238). Also as Chafe (1986) argues, these verbs suggest that the source of knowledge is student writers’ beliefs and ideas; conveying the impression that student writers are responsible for “knowledge claims and beliefs” (Ivanic, 1998, p. 308). In addition to discursive “I”,

Jack has used first person plural “we” in his essay that suggests his sense of belonging to academia.

Citations

The last and “one of the distinctive sounds of scholarly writing” is citations. (Giltrow, 2002, p. 32). Citation as defined by Giltrow, is “attributing of a statement to another speaker” (pp. 32) that “makes the research genres recognizable from a distance” (p. 38). As mentioned above, the study participants as part of their writing process review literature not only to structure their own ideas about the essay topic, but also to find supporting evidence for their arguments and cite published scholars in their essays to back up their own ideas. While they are writing the essay, they “have to decide when to attribute a word or an idea to another writer or when not” (Ivanic, 1998, p. 3) to “sound impressive and authoritative” (Giltrow, 2002, p. 38).

In their essays, study participants have used citations or “hearsay” as a reliable source of evidence to show their attitudes toward knowledge (Chafe, 1986, p. 263). Naming the sources of citation, students have used different citation techniques mainly verbatim and paraphrase in various occasions to 1) back up their own ideas of the subject of study, 2) present a claim in a new paragraph, 3) define a complex concept and 4) even to cite more than one published scholar one after the other to present different voices, whether consensus or opposing, in order to take a position in relation to them

Discussion

From the study participants' point of view the social motive to write academic essays is epistemic. They do not write to construct knowledge and contribute to academia. However, they write to get a deeper understanding of the concepts covered or even not covered in the course and demonstrate this understanding to the instructor who is the only reader. The whole classroom social context being embedded in a university as a research institution provides the discursive context in which students are immersed and affected. The instructors' lectures, feedback and explicit explanation about the required essay, the assigned readings and classroom activities influence the students' interpretation of the rhetorical situation and their responses realized in academic essay genres.

According to Miller (1994) and Giltrow (2002), the analyzed textual features, 1) discipline specific terms, 2) nominal style 3) discursive "I" and 4) citations, are the reflections of the specific disciplinary social context in which academic essay genres have been produced. Although the students do not consider themselves full-fledged members of academia, their essays are likely to demonstrate their learning of the concepts shared in the disciplinary discourse community and the techniques used in the community for "interpreting the world" (Giltrow, 2002, p. 27).

Conclusion

Through conducting this study, I have examined the students' perspectives on academic writing as a mode of communication in academia and explored to what extent they consider themselves as being involved in the

academic discourse community. I have conducted interviews with four students in SLALS master's program to elicit how they interpret and respond to the rhetorical situation. In addition, I have analyzed their academic essays in terms of some genre specific features of an academic essay. An important point should be mentioned that since the interview questions elicited the students' "practical consciousness" of how they go about writing in academia and how they perceive it, the students' answers or their "discursive consciousness" may not be a full representation of their perceptions (Giddens as cited in Giltrow & Valiquette, 1994, p.48).

From the students' point of view the motive for writing in academia is epistemic in that is confined to reproduction of knowledge. The students' interpretation of the rhetorical situation as well as their response to it realized in academic essay genres are influenced by various contextual factors, all embedded in the disciplinary context including the instructor's lectures, seminars, the course readings as well as "the implicit institutional values of university in which writing is elicited" (Freedman, 1996, p. 107).

The determining role of contextual factors in students' perceptions and responses suggest the important role of academia and especially the instructors in providing such a discursive context. Future studies with students from other disciplines and even with instructors from different disciplines will provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' and instructors' perceptions of academic writing. Examining instructors' perceptions of academic writing will

probably demonstrate how they respond to students' academic essays and how they provide the context in which writing is performed.

Implication of the study

Providing students with the opportunity to have readers other than the instructor may have a positive effect on their interpretation of academic writing. It gives them the feeling that they do not write just to fulfill a course requirement and to be assessed by the instructor to get a grade; they write to express their opinions about concepts shared in the disciplinary discourse community that gives them self-confidence about their writing in academia. Therefore, printing all the essays written in a discipline in the form of booklets and keeping them in the library for borrowing will probably allow students in the same discipline to read each others essays and even provide feedback which would help them to develop a sense of academic writing as a mode of communication not only between a student and the instructor but also among students.

Appendix A: The interview questions

1. What kind of writing activities do you do as a university student?
2. What do you think is the purpose of writing the term paper?
3. What do you think are the specific characteristics of a term paper (essay)?
4. Can you explain step by step what do you do for writing the term paper? What are the reasons or purposes of each action you go through?
5. For whom do you write your paper? To what extent you know your reader?
6. What issues do you take into account while writing your term paper?
7. Do you consider yourself as a member of academic social discourse when you write your course paper? Can you explain that?

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