Genres and Conflicts in MBA Writing Assignments

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Abstract: Although Master of Business Administration (MBA) degrees are popular for international students and complex in terms of their linguistic demands, research and pedagogy offer little advice for non-native speakers of English preparing for the written and oral genres of this professional degree. This chapter describes a needs analysis conducted by one pre-matriculation program that teaches international MBA students speaking English as a Second Language (ESL). In addition to online surveys and focus groups, a verbal protocol analysis was conducted with four MBA professors to better understand one key written genre that emerged from the analysis as both important for and challenging to ESL students: the case study write-up. A structure for the genre is presented along with the faculty's evaluative criteria. The study is discussed through a framework of four overlapping theories: genre studies, cognitive strategy instruction, activity theory, and cultural capital. Implications and strategies for preparing MBA students are suggested.

Keywords: MBA, English as a Second Language, Second Language Writing, Genre Studies, Strategy Instruction, Needs Analysis, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, Cultural Capital, Systemic Functional Linguistics, English for Academic Purposes

Demand for Master of Business Administration (MBA) and related graduate business degrees has historically been strong, with almost a quarter of a million prospective students worldwide taking the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) at the time the study reported in this chapter was conducted in 2012. The United States has been the most popular destination for international business students, followed by other Anglophone countries (Graduate Management Admission Council, 2016). In the UK, for example, international students, many of whom are non-native speakers of English, constitute as many as one third of enrollees in business-related graduate degrees (Nathan, 2013). Success in business school requires writing in complex genres, which are often unfamiliar and especially challenging for students writing in their second language (L2). Furthermore, the nature of the MBA degree is contested: at once professional preparation and academic master's (Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994). Like many professional graduate degrees, therefore, the MBA forces faculty and students to negotiate between these some-

times "conflicting demands," which are especially evident in writing assignments (Flower, 1994). Is the intended reader the CEO of a company or the professor? Is the text's purpose to offer strategic advice or display knowledge of course content? Will the text be evaluated by its real-world impact or graded on a professor's rubric? These are questions which often go unasked but which affect the writing process and the written product.

Despite the popularity of the MBA and the complexity of its written genres, little scholarship has directly addressed this topic, and even less so L2 writers' graduate business writing (e.g., Nathan, 2013). Business English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks tend to focus on the needs of working professionals rather than MBA students, and they are generally published in the UK, written in British English, and aimed at the European context (e.g., Dubicka, O'Keefe, Falvey, Kent, & Cotton, 2011).[1] Even the most established writing textbook for (L2) graduate students offers little specific advice for students entering business school since it is mostly focused on research rather than professional degrees (Swales & Feak, 2012). However, business schools have genres that are unique to their discipline, such as the case study and its associated network of oral and written genres (Forman & Rymer, 1999a, 1999b; Freedman et al., 1994). For students who lack the linguistic and cultural "capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) to recognize, analyze, and reproduce these genres, the MBA may prove to be an especially frustrating experience.

The study reported in this chapter was motivated by these frustrations, although they originated from business school faculty rather than students. The university where I teach offers conditional admission to international students, which means they have to meet departments' English proficiency requirements through intensive pre-matriculation English courses before starting graduate classes, rather than on standardized language tests. Many of the full-time MBA students at the university are graduates of our program, and it is not unusual to see business classes in which up to half of the students are international. Since students must demonstrate a very high level of linguistic proficiency and submit a satisfactory GMAT score to matriculate, we were surprised and disturbed to hear in 2011 that some of them were not subsequently flourishing in the MBA. Therefore, in order to better identify and address the source of these difficulties in our classes, we conducted a needs analysis. Although we solicited feedback from both international students and faculty, we focused on the MBA faculty, who had initially raised concerns with us regarding the growth of international student enrollment in their program. As

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1   In the first two units of this popular textbook, *Market Leader Advanced Coursebook* (Dubicka et al., 2011), dates are written in the British format (17 November not November 17), British spelling and idioms are presented ("could you do me a favour and pass the water?"), British business correspondence style is taught ("Dear Sir/Madam"), the CEO of a German company operating in the UK is interviewed, and European education systems are discussed. The first American reference is a Cleveland-based company, but this case study focuses on its UK and Ireland sales team.

Johns (2011) has suggested, in order to improve students' "genre awareness," it is first necessary to investigate disciplinary faculty's expectations. A similar approach has been taken in other needs analyses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, (e.g., Caplan & Stevens, 2017; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Evans, Anderson, & Eggington, 2015; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Horowitz, 1986; Nesi & Gardner, 2012; Trice, 2003).

Methods and Frameworks

The needs analysis of language skills required for L2 students in the MBA program involved three stages: online surveys of international students and faculty, focus groups and interviews with MBA faculty, and a verbal protocol analysis in which four MBA professors "thought aloud" as they evaluated student writing. The surveys and focus groups are briefly summarized below since they led to the creation of the final stage, which is the focus of this chapter. As the analysis evolved, so too did the theoretical frameworks which governed it, and these are also introduced as they provide the lenses through which the results are interpreted. The chapter concludes with specific pedagogical recommendations for cognitive strategies (MacArthur, 2011) that turn genre awareness into cultural and linguistic capital, particularly for L2 writers (Bourdieu, 1986).

Online Surveys

In order to learn more about the discipline-specific language needs and areas of difficulty faced by international MBA students, an online questionnaire (https://nigelteacher.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/actual-faculty-survey.pdf) was distributed via the chair of the Department of Business Administration to all faculty who teach graduate students in the College of Business and Economics. Twenty-eight responses were received between October 2011 and March 2012. Since it was not possible to determine the exact size of the sample frame, a response rate cannot be accurately calculated. However, the department website lists 41 members of the faculty, which would indicate a response as high as 69 percent. Almost all the respondents (22) were teaching or had taught ESL MBA students.

The core of the survey asked respondents to rate the importance of 23 tasks and activities on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). The list of tasks was derived from previous research (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Hale et al., 1996; Zhu, 2004) as well as prior conversations with MBA faculty.

The survey was motivated by genre theories, and in particular those aligned with the so-called "Sydney School" of Systemic Functional Linguistics, or SFL (Rose & Martin, 2012). Scholars in the SFL tradition have explored how genres

constitute and are constituted by the "context of culture" in which they emerge, such that by analyzing relations between genres, it is possible to "map" the culture, in this case the culture of the MBA program at this university (Martin & Rose, 2008; Nesi & Gardner, 2012). Educators working with SFL aim to foster both "mastery of" and "critical control over" high-stakes genres (Martin, 2009; Rothery, 1996), which aligns well with the goals of the needs analysis. Tasks on the survey were phrased as much as possible in language that suggested specific genres and practices (e.g., "reading journal articles" and "participating in class discussions") rather than broad language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) or rhetorical modes (e.g., persuasion, comparison, process). Respondents were then asked to rate their overall perception of their international students' performance on each skill on a scale of 1 (very unsuccessful) to 5 (very successful).[2] A similar survey was also sent to matriculated international students in the MBA program. However, the response rate was not high enough to permit analysis of these data.

An additional theoretical lens used here was English for Academic Purposes, or EAP (Swales, 1990), which focuses on the communicative purposes of academic genres. EAP research has always been concerned with raising awareness of and providing exposure to discipline-specific tasks (Swales & Feak, 2012). Therefore, EAP needs analysis often starts with syllabi and assignments or surveys such as the one in this study (e.g., Cooper & Bikowski, 2007).[3] Thus, in order to build a picture of the linguistic terrain which MBA students need to navigate, MBA syllabi were also collected.

Focus Groups and Interviews

As a follow-up to the survey, focus groups and interviews were conducted with seven faculty and administrators. Preliminary analysis of these discussions as well as the survey revealed two findings which prompted further research. First, the case study method, a pedagogy developed at the founding of the Harvard Business School in the early twentieth century for its nascent MBA (Forman & Rymer, 1999b), was widespread, although its implementation varied somewhat by class and professor. In the Harvard method, students read a published study of a business dilemma in order to participate in a class discussion, the crux of the teaching

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2   While not all international students in the MBA are non-native speakers of English, the vast majority are Chinese, and we did not presume that MBA faculty would be familiar with acronyms such as ESL or L2. Therefore, "international students" was used as a shorthand for "international students for whom English is not their first language."

3   SFL scholars, on the other hand, would usually start with student texts. However, there is some overlap: Nathan (2013) applied an EAP lens to his study of the case write-up, but his careful analysis of the use of linguistic resources such as modality, verb tense, and hedging are reminiscent of SFL genre descriptions.

and learning in this pedagogy. During the discussion, the skillful instructor guides students through "practical problem solving in real situations" that provide "engaged interaction between students and instructor" (Forman & Rymer, 1999b, p. 379). According to Forman and Rymer, the associated written genre, the case write-up or analysis, is merely a "warm-up act" (p. 382), assigned largely for preparation and to ensure students have read the case in advance.

However, for members of the focus groups, case analyses at our institution are far more than a "secondary genre" (Forman & Rymer, 1999b, p. 382). They vary from a single paragraph to a capstone project but could also be formal papers and examination tasks; only one professor interviewed follows the canonical Harvard procedure. Therefore, it was clear that further investigation was needed to better understand the case study genre sequence at the local level.

Secondly, it emerged that many international students were struggling to understand the purpose and expectations of both key written genres (such as the research paper and case write-up) and communicative practices (class discussions and group work). For instance, one professor felt the international students saw case discussions as just "chatting" and not instructional time, whereas from his perspective, the discussions themselves, including "relevant tangents," were the nexus of teaching and learning in her course. Since participation is graded in some classes, two teachers were concerned that international students spoke just for the sake of speaking rather than to contribute to the construction of knowledge through the case discussion. Another professor observed that some international students were unable to apply theoretical frameworks from the textbook to their written case analyses. Several faculty noted problems with research papers, although their expectations for research papers varied widely from an integrative literature review to a consultant's report. Common problems for international students included selecting the wrong sources (e.g., an over-reliance on *BusinessWeek*) and writing a "serial summary" without synthesizing multiple perspectives. All these comments might be explained by students' lack of genre awareness, both of key genres in American business courses and of the ways that assignments may vary even when they are ostensibly in the same genre (cf. Samraj, 2004).

In order to apply these insights to pedagogy, a think-aloud study (http://nigel-teacher.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/think-aloud-protocol.docx) was conducted. The purpose of this additional stage of the needs analysis was to explore one key genre, the case write-up, more deeply in order to help international students improve their awareness of and success in an important and common assignment.

Think-Aloud or Verbal Protocol Analysis

Verbal protocol analysis, sometimes known as a think-aloud study, was developed by cognitive psychologists in order to study the processes which experts use to solve problems. Hayes and Flower (1980) first applied this methodology to the study of

writing and in doing so founded a thread of literacy research that has attempted to deduce the cognitive process in which expert writers engage and thus to develop strategies that novice and struggling writers can consciously apply (e.g., Graham & Perin, 2007; MacArthur, 2011).

The present study was concerned with readers rather than writers and, in particular, their evaluative criteria for grading case analyses because previous research with different populations suggests that raising students' awareness about evaluative criteria can improve their subsequent writing (Moore & MacArthur, 2011). The case analysis was selected as the sole target genre for three reasons: it was ranked as important by a large number of professors in the survey, it appears to be a relatively stable genre, and it is a written genre that has a closely related oral genre (the case discussion) with which international students also often struggle, according to our needs analysis. It would be logistically more difficult to conduct a verbal protocol for a class discussion, so the written form was used for this study in the hope that it would also reveal some of the expectations for case discussions.

The think-aloud protocol was conducted with four full-time faculty members who had indicated willingness to follow up in person on the online survey: Bob, the department chair and a professor of organizational behavior; Samantha, a Harvard-educated assistant professor of management; William, an instructor of management with extensive experience in industry; and Adam, an associate professor of marketing.[4] Before the interview, each professor was asked to choose two student case write-ups: one strong, one weak. After explaining the assignment to the interviewer, I asked each participant to analyze the stronger paper with this prompt: "Please walk me through the paper, telling me what makes it a strong case-study analysis. Since I don't know the assignment or the paper, please tell me everything you notice as you look at it again in terms of evaluating it." A similar question was asked for the weaker paper. The professors were reminded to speak specifically about the papers they had selected and not about the assignment or writing in general. This was supposed to ensure that their comments would reflect students' actual writing and not idealized models.

Each interview lasted around an hour, although they did not all closely follow the planned structure. Bob does not assign case write-ups in his class but participated because he was eager to support the project. Instead, he borrowed and discussed two of Samantha's papers, which I then discussed with Samantha herself. Adam produced a pile of case reports rather than the requested two and proceeded to talk through five of them, identifying their strengths and weaknesses. However, each interview did identify evaluative criteria and differences between strong

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4   Permission to conduct this research was granted by the relevant Institutional Review Board. All names are pseudonyms. Samantha did not say whether she had taken the survey but was recommended for this portion of the study by Bob.

and weak student papers. Participants were not asked specifically to choose papers written by native or non-native speakers of English (they were nearly all papers by domestic students in the end) because the purpose was to identify the features and evaluative criteria of the genre rather than analyze specific students' use of language. The interviews were recorded for analysis.

The theoretical lens for this final stage of the needs analysis was cultural-historical activity theory, CHAT (Engeström, 1987), a rich and complex heuristic for analyzing human behavior in and through context. CHAT proposes six factors which interact in an activity system and provides a useful means to incorporate a sociocultural analysis of genre with the more cognitive verbal protocol analysis. In a CHAT analysis, genres are the *tools*, the "conscious goal-directed actions" that "mediate between activities directed toward societal motives, and nonconscious operations conditioned by the context" (Roth, 2007, p. 45). As conscious actions, they involve cognitive processes, meaning that the choice and understanding of genre are problem-solving tasks amenable to strategy instruction (MacArthur, 2011). The *outcomes* in an activity system are the products of *subjects* (i.e., the students and faculty) who have *motives* which may be multiple and conflicting. The activity is further mediated by the *norms* of the community within which it occurs (such as the expectations for grading and the standards of citation and source use) and the *division of labor* that ascribes roles and responsibilities to the various participants.

Activity theory is a valuable lens in this research because it can identify tensions and contradictions not only within each component of the triangle, such as the dual academic and professional outcomes of the MBA, but along the vertices between them and between intersecting activity systems, such as different courses in the degree program (Roth, Lee, & Hsu, 2009; Russell & Yañez, 2003). Since international students in particular—but not exclusively—may not share the cultural capital which is often assumed in U.S. academic settings, the think-aloud study aimed to make visible professors' sometimes unspoken expectations, motives, norms, and desired outcomes. These explicit and implicit evaluative criteria would then be available to inform us as we help international students prepare for their graduate programs.

Results

Surveys, Focus Groups, and Interviews

Based on the 25 collected syllabi, the faculty survey, and the focus groups, a tentative genre system for the MBA at our university is presented in Figure 14.1. The genres are organized as a system, or network of genres in the SFL tradition (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2008). That is, they have been subdivided into groups with similar characteristics. The genres are categorized along the interpersonal dimension (i.e., by considering the relationship between the writer and

the reader), which is also consistent with an EAP approach to genre; audience is at the top of Swales and Feak's (2012) considerations for graduate writers. Tasks range from highly personal (e.g., reflections) to highly public and even authentic professional products, such as reports prepared for local businesses. However, there is an important caveat to this representation: at some level, all the assignments have as their actual audience the professor. Therefore, while a genre like the case analysis appears to have a professional purpose (recommending a solution to a company's dilemma), it does not exist beyond the classroom (Forman & Rymer, 1999b), the reader is not really the CEO of the company, and the motive for the assignment is not to give business advice, but to demonstrate certain types of knowledge and dispositions, as is seen in Figure 14.1 and Table 14.1.
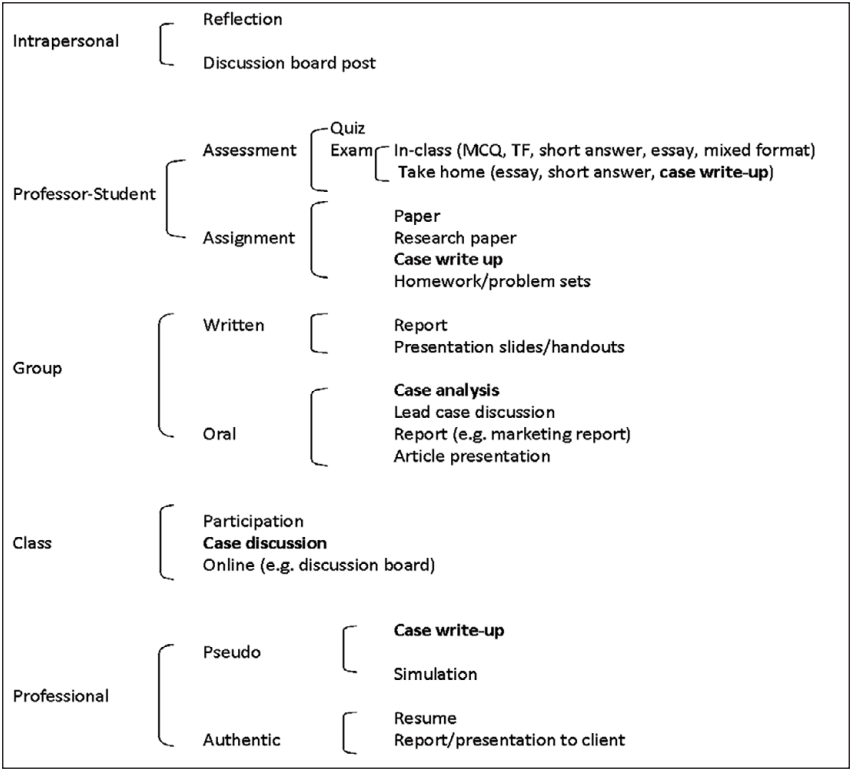

Figure 14.1. Tentative genre system for the MBA. Note: MCQ = Multiple-Choice Questions. Genres in bold are discussed in detail in this chapter.

The survey data give some clue as to the overall value of some of these genres in the MBA. Case reports (oral or written), exams, quizzes, and group work are important across the program, but many genres are very important in some classes and not at all in others (see Table 14.1). For example, research papers were reported as important or very important by nine faculty, suggesting that they are major

assignments in those professors' courses, but are not assigned at all by the other respondents. From a practical perspective, this means that students should expect to encounter a wide range of tasks, genres, and practices, which concords with studies in other universities and countries (Caplan & Stevens, 2017; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Northcott, 2001; Zhu, 2004).

Table 14.1. Importance and difficulty of skills and genres according to MBA faculty

Task / Activity	Importance[a]		Success[b]	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Understanding lectures	4.96	0.2	3.26	0.69
Critical thinking	4.79	0.41	3.17	0.82
Participating in class discussions	4.64	0.49	2.43	0.99
Participating in group discussions/activities	4.58	0.5	3.04	0.82
Speaking clearly	4.46	0.66	2.38	0.77
Reading textbooks	4.38	1.13	3.57	1.03
Reading and discussing case studies	4.33	0.92	2.86	0.89
Using sources (paraphrasing, avoiding plagiarism)	4.33	0.96	2.78	0.94
Asking questions in/after class	4.32	0.63	2.7	0.97
Writing case study reports	4.21	1.14	2.9	0.91
Taking notes	4.2	0.65	3.5	0.65
Giving group presentations	4.09	1.28	2.89	0.66
Writing papers or reports as a group	3.83	1.4	3.17	0.86
Reading journal articles	3.79	1.06	3.41	0.71
Taking essay exams	3.75	1.48	2.94	0.83
Writing short answers on tests	3.71	1.43	3.06	0.8
Writing essays individually out of class	3.63	1.35	3	0.87
Adapting to U.S./university culture	3.63	1.28	2.94	0.64
Leading discussions	3.46	0.88	2.21	0.85
Giving individual presentations	3.42	1.5	3	0.65
Taking multiple-choice tests	3.13	1.51	3.21	0.7
Writing research papers	3	1.59	3	1
Social interactions (receptions, etc.)	2.71	1.4	2.77	0.6

Notes. n = 28. [a] *How important are the following tasks and activities in your classes? 1 = not at all important; 2 = not important; 3 = neither important nor unimportant; 4 = important; 5 = very important.* [b] *How well do your international/ESL students perform on these tasks and activities? 1 = very unsuccessfully; 2 = unsuccessfully; 3 = adequately; 4 = successfully; 5 = very successfully*

The case write-up genre chosen for the think-aloud study scored an average of 4.21 out of a possible 5 in importance, although the large variance (standard deviation of 1.14) indicates that case study is either very important or not used at all in class. Nonetheless, the case write-up was the highest ranked writing assignment overall in terms of importance. International students' performance was rated on average slightly below satisfactory on this task (mean score 2.9).

Verbal Protocol Analysis

While there were variations between the professors' expectations of student case write-ups, a relatively stable genre emerged from the think-aloud interviews (Table 14.2), which is reminiscent of, but not identical to, a problem/solution text (Swales & Feak, 2012). Samantha provided the clearest explanation of the case analysis genre. She had both studied and taught under the case method at Harvard, although her use of the written assignment as an assessment tool still differs considerably from the traditional pedagogy (Forman & Rymer, 1999a). Hers was the only assignment that explicitly included a reflection stage, although this has been reported elsewhere and so is included as an optional stage (Nathan, 2013).[5] The stages of the genre are explained in Table 14.2 and were crucial to all the professors' evaluations of students' writing. The stages corresponded to different subheadings in some professors' assignments. For instance, William's typically included an industry analysis (setup), external and internal analyses (diagnosis), selection analysis, and implementation (recommendations). It is helpful, however, for students to see beyond the headings to the rhetorical function of each part of the analysis.

Table 14.2. Stages in the case write-up genre

Stage	Description & Function
Setup	Identify and introduce the key players, the dilemma, and opportunities (but not a summary of the case)
Diagnosis	Analysis (not description) of the problem or opportunity in terms of "root causes"
Recommendation	Alternative solutions plus the writer's chosen solution with justification, sometimes accompanied by a specific action plan
Reflection (required in some assignments only)	What did you learn from the case? How does it connect to the theories in the course?

5   Nathan (2013) found a similar genre structure in his EAP-oriented analysis of MBA case analyses at one UK university, published after these data were collected. Nathan's analysis is somewhat more complex and includes some stages that were not identified in this study, for instance "discussion of methodology." However, the three stages that he identified as obligatory concur with my think-aloud results: orientation (setup), analysis (diagnosis), and advice (recommendation).

By comparing stronger and weaker essays, the verbal protocols revealed expectations about each stage of the genre, only some of which are made explicit to students in some courses. For instance, the setup should not summarize the case (because it is already known to the reader); keywords, facts, characters, and statistics from the case should be referenced; and format and style conventions must be observed, such as a title page, an executive summary in some assignments, and font and margin sizes. Professors' expectations may be idiosyncratic, and students should expect variation in the criteria for content, organization, grammar, and presentation. Adam, for instance, claimed that his assignments were "unstructured," which might mislead students into disregarding organization; in fact, he still expected the same stages as the other faculty, but he felt that presenting a "formula" to follow in the write-up would trivialize the task. This seems to put students at a disadvantage if they fail to recognize the unspoken expectations. Similarly, students without strong genre awareness might not realize that for some professors, the focus is on the case itself and the quality of the solution, while for others, the case is incidental, and it is the business principles behind the dilemma which should be emphasized.

Two of the interviewees shared their grading schemes, which again showed the range in evaluative practices. Samantha provides her students with an analytical rubric that clearly sets out her expectations for each stage of the analysis. For example: "Does the diagnosis highlight the important facts about the people and situation of the case then help us to understand the dilemma? Do you describe why these facts are important to understanding the dilemma?" William, on the other hand, uses a grading scheme in which two points are available in each of these broad categories: presentation, writing, grammar, analysis, and comprehensiveness. Overall, though, these data suggest that a student who has mastered the criteria for one professor would have little difficulty adapting to the expectations of another. The key is to raise awareness about the genre and the ways it is received.

All the respondents discussed language or grammar as an issue for ESL writers, even when we were not specifically discussing international students' papers at the time. William, for instance, began by arguing that language proficiency alone was the difficulty for international students. However, in the course of the interview, it became clear that language was rarely the major weakness of unsuccessful papers, even in William's classes. All four professors explicitly grade grammar, sometimes subsuming it under the heading of "presentation." Two of them started out by highlighting the importance of accuracy of written language, but this concern soon gave way to other considerations which turned out to be more important in their evaluation of the students' writing. This is not to say that linguistic proficiency is unimportant. On the contrary, papers perceived to have weak grammar are heavily penalized, but correctness in itself is, unsurprisingly, insufficient.

There was broad agreement that good writers display some quality that goes beyond facility with language and comprehension of the case. This factor was given

many names throughout the interviews, for instance, *insight, creativity, intuition,* and *perceptiveness*. It was described as a "way of thought" and a "mindset" and contrasted to writing that is "canned." Faculty praised papers that displayed "depth of analysis." Overall, faculty are looking for written evidence of "critical thinking," a notoriously slippery term, which often elided into the student's "capacity for thinking and intelligence" (Bob). As Adam concluded, "You can get a really good grade if you have one really good idea that's not intuitively obvious."

This reminder that the assignment is graded is important on two levels. First, the underlying, sometimes implicit, motive of the case assignment is typically to test students' mastery of concepts in the course and their ability to apply them to a real-world situation. For this reason, strong papers include references to the textbook, course concepts, and other cases. In Samantha and Tom's course (they teach the same class, which is typically taken early in the MBA program), all the sources are introduced in class, and the textbook is the typical reference. Second, students are also expected to see beyond the particular instance of the case and recognize the broader principles at stake. Adam wants above all to see connections with other cases. William gives no guidance on external sources but accepts references to the business press, industry newsletters, annual reports, and interviews. For him, the ability to select the correct sources and "pick what's important" is the mark of learning. His course is the capstone in both the undergraduate and graduate business programs, which may partially explain his high expectations.

These results provide clues to the types of thinking and writing that MBA faculty value. As can be seen, sourcing is one such expectation. Additional research into these writing assignments might be able to further unpack the assumptions hidden in words like *perceptiveness* and *insight*. For instance, historians have been found—through think-aloud studies of professional writing—to value sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration (Wineburg, 2001), and literacy scholars have turned these into discipline-specific cognitive strategies that can teach "historical understanding" even to students with learning disabilities (Ferretti, MacArthur, & Okolo, 2005). Tentatively, the present think-aloud data point to such strategies in MBA case analyses: *sourcing, justification* (supporting recommendations with numerical data, connected cases, and management theories), and *tolerating ambiguity* (considering alternative hypotheses; accepting "imperfect answers," in Adam's words). These are far more amenable to instruction than contested and culturally-loaded terms such as "critical thinking" (Atkinson, 1997).

One of the most interesting aspects of the case write-up, which partly explains the variations among professors' expectations, is its dual nature (Freedman & Adam, 1996). Some faculty explicitly ask students to write in the imagined role of "a consultant to the top echelon of the company" (William). For Samantha, the writer is similarly "a coach, advisor, or mentor." However, the last section of her assignment is a reflection on learning, which breaks from the consultant mode and

must be written in the student's voice; indeed, she expects the use of the first-person pronoun in this section (one paper avoided the first person, which she found "distant" and "not personal"). Bob was less interested in the consultant persona, praising a student who used a concept from the textbook: "professors like that . . . The writer understands that assignments are given in context." Likewise, Adam focused on the "teaching principles" of the case rather than the content of the case itself. He noted that students usually "buy in" to the method because they see the utility of case study both for understanding the concepts (an academic goal) and for professional preparation. His assignments look more like business reports (they start with an executive summary, for example), but he requires references to the textbook, which would clearly not be found in professional writing.

Discussion

This needs analysis surveyed MBA faculty at one university to identify important and challenging genres, skills, and practices for ESL students in one graduate business degree. Subsequently, verbal protocols were conducted to explore one of these genres—the case write-up—in more depth. Although the results of this study should not be generalized beyond the local context, in many ways, the case analysis is emblematic of MBA writing assignments generally, perhaps even the entire degree. Professional master's programs differ from doctoral degrees—the focus of much research into graduate-level writing (e.g., Casanave & Li, 2008; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; for exceptions, see Fredrick et al., this collection; Henderson & Cook, this collection; Tierney, 2016)—in one critical way: the *outcome*, to use the term from activity theory, is always dual. On the one hand, the MBA is a business degree which typically leads to management positions or is taken part-time by working professionals. The program announces that the MBA "gives students the skills and confidence to navigate today's ever-changing business world" ("Master of Business Administration," n.d.). This goal was reflected in several professors' comments. For example, Adam complained that many students in their early case write-ups have "unrealistic expectations about what happens out there" in the business world. He expects students to "think of everything from the company's perspective." William commented at the end of his interview that the task gives students experience with types of writing that will be useful in the future to "impress superiors."

However, as Freedman et al. (1994) observed in their analysis of case reports in a Canadian university, "the university context clearly shaped the social relations between reader and writer, the rhetorical and social goals of the writing, and the nature of the reading and writing practices in ways that had profound implications for the writing" (p. 202). For instance, in Freedman et al.'s study and mine, students

were expected to cite sources, an academic and not a business practice. This "doubleness," to use Freedman et al.'s term, is indicative of the Janus-like tension at the heart of the MBA, which is at once a professional preparation and a *Master* of Business Administration, with all that the academic credential entails. These conflicting outcomes (earning grades versus becoming a better manager; evaluating and grading versus supervising and mentoring) feed back through the activity system.

Consequently, students might have conflicting *motives*, which affects their identity as *subjects*, the *tools* (genres) they should choose, the *division of labor* between reader and writer, and the *norms* of the discourse community: are they supposed to write as consultants and propose the best solution for the company (as John and William seem to want) or write as students to please the professor, as Bob suggested? This can be especially problematic for ESL students, who may have undertaken preparation programs geared at a broadly painted general academic competency rather than building discipline-specific cultural and linguistic capital. As a consequence, they may be struggling to adopt any kind of academic or professional persona in English, and having to switch between them could be very problematic. This has been explored in other graduate fields (e.g., Casanave & Li, 2008), but further research is needed into ESL students' writing for such MBA assignments, especially given the dramatic growth in enrollment in master's degrees, particularly among international and traditionally underrepresented demographic groups (Caplan & Cox, 2016).

If activity theory's *motive* can be equated to the communicative purpose of the genre (in an EAP analysis) or its social function (from an SFL perspective), then the case write-up presents a special type of "mutt genre" (Wardle, 2009). Wardle's mutts are first-year compositions that are crossed with disciplinary writing, for example, a sociology research paper written for a first-year writing class. These texts risk devolving into mindless mimicry, genres whose purpose is just "to write the genre." The resulting mutt genres are empty because they have been divorced of their social function: to create and transmit knowledge between members of a disciplinary community. In the context of the MBA, the case write-up is more complex because its purpose is not, as in Wardle's situation, simply to learn a form of writing: students are supposed to be learning principles of management so that they will be able to make similar decisions for themselves in the future. At the same time, professors believe that students are learning a style of writing that will carry over into the workplace and "impress" their supervisors. As such, the assignment is designed for transfer, even though the genre itself is entirely a pedagogical invention (Forman & Rymer, 1999b).

Freedman et al. (1994) cast doubt on the extent to which such transfer can occur: "Only through . . . exposure to relevant professional contexts, with the situated learning entailed, will writers acquire the genres appropriate to these milieus" (p. 222). However, an activity systems perspective combined with an EAP or SFL theory of genre is more hopeful. Learning to write a case analysis means adding a new tool to the toolbox, a new genre to the student's linguistic repertoire. Arguably, it is through

experiencing conflicts in the activity that learning occurs: the purpose of identifying tensions in an activity system is not to expose weaknesses but to find loci of transformation (Smith, 2010). As one of my participants noted at the end of his interview, students do improve at the task after many iterations. Furthermore, activity systems are interlinked (Russell & Yañez, 2003): the outcome of a first-semester MBA class is access to a higher-level class; all the courses have the degree and ultimately the workplace as additional outcomes. All participants (faculty or students) carry with them their previous experiences into the next activity: the tools are not created entirely anew each time. New genres are not only acquired *in situ*; their structure can be deduced by writers with sufficiently developed genre awareness (Johns, 2011). Furthermore, it must be remembered that in SFL, the goal is not just to learn the genre; it is to access the epistemologies of a discipline (Martin, 2009). Thus, several faculty commented on the importance of using the correct vocabulary, a gatekeeper into the language of this highly specialized form of schooling and the profession to which it leads.[6]

In addition to these benefits, mastery of the case write-up increases cultural capital, both the unembodied form (genre knowledge) and its embodiment (Alfred Lerner College of Business and Economics MBA diploma and future career opportunities). However, for this to happen with non-mainstream learners such as ESL students, the pedagogy needs to be made visible, and faculty need a metalanguage to describe the strengths and weaknesses of students' writing in ways that learners can use. The proliferation of generic advice to think critically, be creative, find non-intuitive solutions, and "flesh out" paragraphs may be unclear, especially to non-native speakers of (academic) English. Without such instruction, education at any level can only serve the function that Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) identified, of reproducing social structures "by proving to the privileged that they deserve their success and to the excluded that they deserve their exclusion" (p. 210). And since academic English "has never been anyone's mother tongue" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 115), this discussion pertains to other non-traditional groups of MBA students besides international students.

Implications

This study supports an approach to preparing and teaching international MBA students that combines genre and cognitive strategies. The case analysis was repeatedly described as a problem-solving task in essence. This has two implications: First, from a genre perspective, the case analysis to some extent follows the structure and functions of a problem-solution text (Swales & Feak, 2012, Chapter 3). Second,

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6   Other authors in this collection have reminded me that corpus studies might be helpful to establish a base of genre-specific vocabulary for pre-teaching (cf. Blazer and DeCapua, this collection). I am grateful for feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter from them, the editors, and Dr. Charles MacArthur.

as for all such problems, cognitive strategies exist that can be described, taught, learned, and employed to reach a solution (MacArthur, 2011).

The evaluative criteria discerned in this study can be turned into self-regulated strategies. For example, as a result of this research, we added a case analysis to the curriculum of our pre-matriculation class for international MBA students, the criteria for which are presented with the assignment in the form of a rubric or checklist. Students can be taught to apply the rubric to sample papers, use it to write papers collaboratively, and finally apply the criteria as part of peer review and in both the planning and revision of their independent writing. This strategy has been found to significantly improve the persuasive writing of community college students in basic writing classes (MacArthur & Philippakos, 2013). The benefit of this form of instruction is that it raises students' awareness about genre-specific writing expectations. This is especially helpful for ESL students who may have had very limited exposure to variation among genres. If this is done consistently, students develop the metacognitive skill of analyzing an assignment effectively. At the very least, understanding that genres vary systematically and that assignments have particular requirements may make it less likely that students will produce the wrong genre, such as the common mistake of treating the exercise as a narrative not an analysis.

Another strategy that has been validated with younger ESL writers is color coding (Olson & Land, 2007). Students learn to mark up their texts with different colored highlighters or pencils: for Olson and Land's seventh-grade English-language learners' writing literary analysis, the categories were plot summary (yellow), commentary (blue), and supporting detail (green). The goal is to reduce the yellow, increase the blue, and ensure there is enough green to support the commentary. Olson and Land call this a "making-visible revision strategy" (p. 285), and they found positive and sustained effects on ESL students' writing by teaching this and other cognitive strategies. The color-coding strategy could easily be adapted to the case write-up: yellow for narrative of the case, blue for analysis of the problems and solutions, and green for supporting evidence, statistics, and citations. While this strategy by itself may not produce papers that display creativity and intuition, it should help students learn to focus on analysis and effective use of sources, thus developing the ability to write like an MBA student.

Strategies such as these can readily be incorporated into a genre-based pedagogy such as SFL's teaching/learning cycle (Martin, 2009; Rothery, 1996), which was designed to scaffold mastery of high-stakes genres for low-achieving students, especially those without a background in standard written English. The teachers guide students in an analysis of examples of the genre in order to highlight its structure and important linguistic resources. It is at this stage that grammar and vocabulary instruction can take place for ESL students who need it. Next, students work in groups or as a class to write a new text in the genre collaboratively. Here, explicit strategy instruction (such as applying evaluative criteria) can be usefully

employed. Finally, once they are ready to succeed, students produce an assignment independently, using strategies for planning, drafting, and revising (such as the color-coding strategy). Although this is not a pedagogy that is likely to take root in the MBA classroom itself, students who learn to analyze, write, and revise critical genres effectively in pre-matriculation intensive English programs will be well placed to tackle future writing assignments.

Equipping international MBA students with the genres and strategies they will need has the intentional side-effect of increasing their cultural capital (see also Field, Stevens, Cherian, & Asenavage, 2016, for a co-curriculum program of engagement and integration resulting in part from this needs analysis). This must be accompanied with other aspects of cultural capital, such as knowledge of American business practices, which is especially important for students coming from countries that do not espouse free-market economics. Case studies are ideal for this. By engaging in practices that approximate those of the MBA classroom (reading, discussing, and writing about case studies), preparatory programs can help students develop their linguistic resources and cultural schema in parallel. At the same time, students are learning to think in ways that U.S. business faculty value by discussing and applying the standards that their professors will use to judge their perceptiveness, insights, and critical thinking abilities (Ferretti et al., 2005).

Finally, it is important that both faculty and students recognize the conflicts and tensions in the MBA activity system. This should enable professors to give clear directions that incorporate the motives for each assignment (professional, academic, or a combination of the two), the role they expect students to play (e.g., as consultants), and the tools available to them (the genres they should write and the sources they should cite). As Starke-Meyerring (2011) has shown, graduate faculty are often unaware of the criteria by which they evaluate students' writing since disciplinary—and, by extension, professional—writing is "transparent" to them but often highly opaque to students, particularly L2 writers. Think-aloud research thus has the potential to make expectations for writing visible to everyone, which can improve pre-matriculation programs, reduce disciplinary faculty's frustration, and shine a light for students on the writing practices in which they are engaged. Ultimately, awareness of the dual and contested nature of the MBA can help students navigate their assignments, choose the most effective linguistic resources, and negotiate the multiple motives and outcomes.

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