

CHAPTER 29

RESISTING THE NORMATIVE? NEGOTIATING MULTILINGUAL IDENTITIES IN A COURSE FOR FIRST YEAR HUMANITIES STUDENTS IN CATALONIA, SPAIN

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In 1999, 30 countries signed the Bologna declaration, which would set the grounds for the creation and development of the European Higher Education Area, aimed at making European universities more competitive by progressively eliminating the area's segmentation and by increasing student and teacher mobility (for details, see <http://www.ehea.info>). The subsequent process of adaptation caused a general upheaval in Catalan academia, as many students and teachers resisted what they perceived as a move towards the marketization of higher education. The Bologna process had a strong impact on the structure of new degrees and on the working patterns of university professors of all levels due to the introduction of seminar work at undergraduate level and more student-focused pedagogies. It also dramatically shifted the language balance towards English. As a result the already complicated balance between Catalan and Spanish in education and research is now being reconceptualized to make room for English and its prevalence as the academic language of prestige. These efforts towards internationalization have affected students' and faculty's relationship to their background languages and their self-image as members of academia.

This chapter looks at the effects on students' attitudes and beliefs, of learning to operate within academic genres in English. It focusses on a first year course in the Humanities designed to compensate for the lack of previous programmes in writing instruction and students' low English language proficiency whilst helping them develop an academic identity. Both ourselves and our students are members of a multilingual community in which a minority language (Catalan) coexists with Spanish and other foreign languages, a community that is being pressurised to adopt English as the key to internationalization. We argue that teaching methodologies based on an academic literacies approach can increase students' awareness

of the elements that make up academic communication, help them analyze the inter-relationships between these elements, and challenge the status quo in which minority languages and their speakers are marginalized from the construction of knowledge. However, we acknowledge the difficulty of engaging students in contesting academic genres and roles at a stage when they are still struggling to become part of the academic community.

DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LITERACIES AT UNIVERSITAT POMPEU FABRA (UPF)

Within the Bologna process, the new Humanities degree at UPF (Barcelona, Spain) requires students to enroll in subjects taught in English to graduate. This degree starts with a two-year period of general courses, followed by a specialized second cycle. The general period includes two instrumental courses aimed at preparing students to deal with the genres of the different disciplines within the Humanities (Art, History, Literature, Philosophy, and such), one in Catalan/Spanish and one in English, both during students' first year. Both subjects need to overcome students' resistance to academic know-how courses.

In the new European context, academic literacy entails for our Humanities students the mastering of academic genres in students' two mother tongues (Catalan and Spanish), and in English, with German or French courses available as well. Academic genres, can be regarded as 1) the mediating instruments of academic interaction; 2) the prevailing form of assessment; 3) tools of learning and knowledge construction; and 4) marks of identity. Academic genres are students' key to their permanence at university and their long-term learning. Becoming participants in the academic community requires students to accept the entry rules of the community, have their participation sanctioned by the expert members of the communities, and actively participate in the exchanges of the community so as to be eligible for acceptance and show adherence to the community. Alongside and through academic genres, students are expected to acquire the community's collective goals and knowledge, and prove their value as valid members of this community.

Academic writing, like all forms of communication, is an act of identity: it not only conveys disciplinary "content" but also carries a representation of the writer ... our discursal choices align us with certain values and beliefs that support particular identities. (Ken Hyland, 2004, p. 1092)

However, the process of initiation can be problematic for students, as academic genres can sometimes contradict discourse practices that identify them as part of their home community, and therefore challenge their values and identity.

Because of the gradual process through which new members acquire the genres

of a discipline, writing ends up seeming a transparent thing, the simple transcription of knowledge and research, what David Russell (1991) called the *myth of transparency*. As a result professors often misinterpret students' difficulties learning to read and use genres. The *myth of transience* (Mike Rose, 1985; Russell, 1991) helps the academics mask their lack of involvement in students' acquisition of academic genres behind the assumption that past students did not need any further instruction, and that it is a problem with the present students only. Such misconceptions about how students acquire discipline-specific ways of communicating can lead to a negative view of students' struggles to become part of the academic community, with language and literacy becoming visible only as a problem to be fixed through additional or remedial measures (Theresa Lillis & Mary Scott, 2007).

For non-native English speakers, academic literacy involves an extra challenge, as the practices of the different linguistic communities cannot be automatically transferred, even within the same discipline. Apart from the language-related issues they may find, students are hindered by their own rhetorical identities, which "may be shaped by very different traditions of literacy" (Hyland, 2004, p. 1091-1092), determined by often implicit cultural-specific issues that cause a "crisis of representation and associated instability of meaning" (Barry Smart, 1999, p. 38). Students' contribution to collective knowledge, and hence their value within the academic community, is thus undermined by their image as poor producers of academic discourse in the language of prestige (Aya Matsuda, 2003; Marko Modiano, 1999).

Based on her study of international students' writing in German, Stella Bölker (2003) classified into four categories students' conflicts in writing academic papers in a foreign language: the content-specific level, the domain-specific procedural level, the level of cultural coinage, and the foreign language proficiency level. The first level covers subject knowledge, as first-year students feel extremely inexperienced regarding the knowledge of their discipline. Field-specific procedural knowledge refers to the generic conventions that characterize academic writing—students' need to employ the procedures typical of the field, even if they have not had any specific instruction in them. Regarding the problems derived from cultural coinage, the conventions of particular academic communities are strongly influenced by their different traditions, with, for example, the Anglo-American style being quite different from the Continental style of academic writing (see Lotte Rienecker & Peter Stray Jörgensen, 2003). Such cultural differences affect both the focus and the form of the academic genres members write in, and do not solely depend on the language they are written in. When writing essays, students need to cope with planning, revising, and putting down in words their ideas according to a topic and a set of formal rules they are new to. Simultaneously, they need to deal with their deficits in foreign language competence, even if they choose to do part of the task in their mother tongue to avoid this problem. However, the main issue regarding foreign language proficiency is that the students' language issues mask their difficulties at

other levels, as we observed in a preliminary study (Angels Oliva-Girbau, 2011). Students writing in L2 tend to see their lack of competence in L2 as the only source of their problems in writing, disregarding the cultural, discipline-specific and procedural problems they may have.

ACTIVITIES TO DISPEL THE TRANSPARENCY OF WRITING

The materials for the first-year course on English for the Humanities are aimed at promoting students' explicit discussion and contestation of their own developing identities within the activity system of the Humanities as a way to scaffold their acquisition of the tools and goals of the academic community. It is our belief that such programmes should include not only textual and contextual work, but also opportunities to reflect on and negotiate identity issues, which can contribute to empowering students to see themselves as valid members of the academic community. During the first two years of the study, we interviewed volunteer students and distributed questionnaires in order to assess the materials and adapt them to the context of the new Humanities degree. However, the number of students who participated in the voluntary interviews was too low to be considered representative of the students' situation. Consequently, during the third iteration of the course, we decided to use students' writing on the course as data for our research as well, in order to provide us with an emic perspective of students' process of initiation. The reflective activities used in the course have two goals. First, to foster students' development of their academic persona through the study of academic genres in relation to the other components of the academic community. Second, to guide students towards awareness and reflective analysis of the ambivalence latent in their negotiation of difference between their previous identities and their academic ones, so that they may become capable of managing their construction of a new academic identity.

In order to reach these learning goals, the course instructors 1) teach students about the components of the academic community in which they intend to participate and offer them opportunities to reflect on them through the analysis of texts; 2) promote students' awareness of the cultural, ideological and linguistic aspects underlying the nature and mechanics of Anglo-American style genres in comparison to Continental genres and how these determine their relation to the other components of the academic community; and 3) provide room for discussing the conflicts students experience regarding the construction of their own identities in relation to their initiation into the academic community, contesting institutional views on literacy, knowledge, language choices and power relations.

Activities are intended to promote awareness, analysis and contestation. These responses do not exclude each other, but occur in a continuum, as awareness leads to analysis, and both are necessary to create opportunities for students to challenge

their novice status, identity and possibilities within the system. Awareness activities refers to tasks aimed at raising students' awareness of the nature of the academic community and its components. Analysis refers to activities that guide students' analysis of the genres of the discipline and the underlying assumptions that determine their functions and features. The third category, contestation, covers activities that provide room for discussion and challenging of the academic community and its components, students' role, and their process of initiation. As an illustration, we present two activities that were carried out during the first weeks and the last weeks of the term respectively.

First, as follow-up to a whole-group discussion in seminar two, we designed a collaborative task in which students had to tell out of a list of descriptors which ones corresponded to canonical Anglo-American or Continental genres, regardless of the language in which they were written but on the basis of the contents, the writer's approach, structural features, and such. The list of descriptors was based on the work of Rienecker and Stray Jørgensen (2003), and adapted to students' language level. In an on-line forum, students presented one or two of the items they had chosen and justified their decision in a short paragraph. Firstly, we wanted students to become aware of the cultural differences across different discourse communities. Secondly, we wanted students to see the connection between the adoption of certain genres and the cognitive processes involved in the construction and communication of knowledge. And thirdly, we wanted them to develop their own approach to somewhere in the continuum between Anglo-American and Continental genres, and take control of their discursual choices to construct their own identity as writers. When presenting the task in class, we used practical examples and students' own experiences to help them understand the descriptors. However, the exercise made students think that there is a prescriptive dividing line between genres in one tradition and another, and it made them link genres to the languages they are written in. Indeed, students viewed their own genres, cognitive processes and identities as defective and inadequate, in opposition to those of native English speakers. Writing in Catalan or Spanish became something wrong, something to be done as a last resort.

Towards the end of the course, our second activity was introduced. Based on Halliday's functional components of discourse, it aimed at raising students' awareness of the way genres do things with words, i.e., the functional components of genres and how they are realized by textual features. Additionally it aimed to expose the context beyond texts, and to look at the relationship genres establish between members of the community, between writers and their individual and collective goals, and between writers and their texts. The third goal was to help students reflect on the extent to which a writer's expert/novice status determines the choice of specific generic features, giving students the chance to challenge the transparency of writing by exposing the rules of the game. For every section of an essay (introduction, body

and conclusion), students had to write a list of the functions that different sentences performed in it—such as attracting the readers’ attention, illustrating one’s arguments, acknowledging the limitations of one’s research, and so on. These functions were then connected to a diagram showing academia as an activity system (Yrjö Engeström, 1995; Alexei Leontiev, 1978; David Russell & Arturo Yáñez, 2003) made up of subjects who share some common goals which they try to achieve using tools and patterns of interaction that are unique to that community. Students analyzed a sample paragraph from one of the three sections using the list of functions they had previously written, connecting linguistic resources to functions. At the end of the session, students were asked to guess the status of the writers, and their relationship to the other elements of the activity system, using quotes from the texts as evidence. For example, the use of hedging in the results section often signaled the writer’s lack of commitment to the contents of the paragraph, and hence his/her novice status. The use of canonical (“expert”) and non-canonical (written by previous students, for example) paragraphs provided students with a wide range of language resources to implement, and exposed the heterogeneity of academic genres regardless of their language and field of use. Though the activity also presented non-expert, non-native speakers as efficient communicators, we were interested to note that students’ contributions systematically failed to acknowledge this, hence ignoring the gradual progress in their own and their peers’ progress from novice to expert status.

GENRES, IDENTITY, AND THE BUILDING OF AN INCLUSIVE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

The data we gathered through students’ participation in these activities shows an increased awareness of other levels of difficulty besides their foreign language skills. Thus, their trouble understanding and producing such genres was no longer purely linguistic, but also determined by cultural differences, problems finding an audience, lack of content and procedural knowledge, status, and such:

It’s very difficult to change our way of thinking I start writing in English, but then I forget a lot of things that I wanted to write, therefore I first write in Spanish or Catalan and then I translate to English. Well, I know it’s wrong but if I write directly in English I can’t control my ideas.

When asked in different activities to reflect on their problems with academic genres in English, students realized that they lacked control over content, form, audience and reception. Even though this lack of control existed in their native language(s) too, it was exposed even more clearly by their deficiencies in writing in English, and because of the different planning and writing processes Anglo-Amer-

ican writing requires from them. As a consequence, their still insecure academic identity was undermined by their inability to communicate transparently using academic genres, certainly in their L1, but even more so in English where they struggled between their will to create and their will to communicate: "I can start writing only when my thoughts are totally structured and when I know how I am going to conclude. So I have the feeling of being paralyzed for a while before starting the writing"; "I often explain more things than are necessary and I often expand the topic and add some new ones, which is not correct in English texts."

Students' wish to contribute was still strongly individualistic, rather a personal challenge than a contribution to collective goals. They felt that they needed to assert the legitimacy of their belonging to the academic community, which depended solely on their ability to articulate their contributions in an academic manner and submit them to the approval of an audience superior in status to them. In this respect, academic socialization overlaps first-year students' entrance into maturity and their reach for new more powerful and independent roles. At this point, reasserting their academic identities was much more important as an individual goal than the collective goals and patterns of interaction established by the community; the social construction of knowledge is not feasible when one cannot see oneself as a legitimate member of the community. Students felt they were constantly in competition with one another: when asked about the functions of conclusions, their replies were "to undermine the opponent," "to defend your point of view," and "to completely convince your reader."

The data gathered during the final seminars of the course seems to indicate that students reached a later stage of their process of initiation. The students who were committed to the seminar work appeared to feel more confident regarding the legitimacy of their academic identity, and their capacity to participate meaningfully in the construction of the ideational contents of their area of interest. In the last questionnaire, one of the students stated that he/she felt:

... prepared to write texts that have coherence, cohesion and a complete, clear sense. It is very important, because in this way we can express our opinion impersonally, and we will be listened to by the world.

Students' struggle with the acquisition of academic genres is tied up with the conflicts derived from their process of initiation into the academic community. Explicit discussion of this process helped deny the transparency of academic genres, and exposed students' difficulties, thus changing their focus from language to content, and from tools to goals, functions and relationships. By gaining a deeper understanding of how to use generic tools and how genres shape/are shaped by identity, students appeared to gain more control of the image they project and their

relationship to the ideational contents of the Humanities and other members of the system. More control means that students may be able to make their own choices by connecting, through generic patterns, their construction of their academic identity and their representations of the elements that make up the community.

Language-wise, students started the term in denial of English and the genres they associated with this language. Then, as the term progressed, they reversed this attitude to place English as the only language of true academic communication, in opposition to the creative capabilities of their mother tongue and the genres associated with it, which students saw as relegated to private use. The contributions of students attending the seminars—and the silence of the absentees—evidence the fragility of students' academic identities. Students either discarded their previous identities (linked to their mother tongue) as inadequate, or refused to join the part of the academic community that regards English as its *lingua franca*. Throughout the course, we failed to engage students in the series of opportunities the materials offered for contestation: we found no evidence of a student daring to challenge the prevalence of English. On the contrary, students seemed to accept their subordinate position because of their inability to change their background, cognitive processes, and identities. Rather than challenging academic genres and the cognitive processes and values associated to them, the students who participated in the seminars embraced Anglo-American academic genres as the solution to their communication issues. Students linked their reading and writing problems to their identities as Catalan/Spanish writers. By rejecting genres in these languages, they distanced themselves from the apparently defective cognitive processes and status associated with users of less prominent genres and languages.

The increasing internationalization of academia and the widespread view of English as its *lingua franca* can create a barrier for students from other language backgrounds, preventing them from entering the new European university or leading them to view their own language and culture as inferior to it. However, students need not be acculturated into the system, as their other identities can contribute to enrich the academic community. In the new academic community, there should be room for different views, genres, languages and the different contributions all these can make. When designing materials for non-native speakers, it is important to emphasize the multiplicity of literacies in academia, and their corresponding cognitions, identities and goals. As discussed in this chapter, the course activities designed within a more genre-based pedagogy sometimes narrowed students' view of the components of academic communication, and mistakenly presented dominant academic genres as the only possible option. On the other hand, the materials designed according to the principles of academic literacies were successful in increasing students' awareness of and capacity to analyze the components of academic communication, and exposed to some extent the power relations that are established, negotiated and challenged using genres, between users, communities

and languages.

Only within the context of plural literacies can minority languages retain their purpose and relevance. If we fail to enable students to challenge the status quo and lead them to accept English as the only language of academic communication, we are depriving their native tongue of prestige, and we are depriving them of the opportunity to create and contribute meaningfully to the social construction of knowledge. In fact, the notion of a unique academic literacy would create a linguistic elite and ignore valuable academic contributions just because they come from the fringes of the system.

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