CHAPTER 2.

TEACHING ACADEMIC LITERACY ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM AS INSTITUTIONAL POLICY: THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE GENERAL SARMIENTO (ARGENTINA)

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The aim of this chapter is to briefly outline a genre-based academic literacy program (PRODEAC) across the university curriculum. Its major goal is to promote students' academic performance through the development of advanced literacy in institutional environments. From the theoretical perspective selected (systemic-functional linguistics), a genre-based pedagogy influences knowledge construction in disciplines and empowers students to engage academic, scientific and professional social activities. Two of the critical resources of the program's design will be described: the modality of implementation, which is a device called "negotiation among peers," and the institutional support during the process of installation. Some results in different areas of impact will be also summarized, such as the progress of the students and the university professors involved, as well as the progressive growth of the program itself to its present stability, plus new challenges this program faces.

The aim of this paper is to present an institutional program, developed at Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento (UNGS), for teaching academic and professional literacy across the university curriculum. The UNGS is located in a suburban town 30 kilometers from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Most of the students of the university (around 60%) belong to the working class, with very

low economic resources to cover basic needs and that do not satisfy either cultural or recreational needs. Their parents have had access only to the first levels of education: 55% of them have done complete or incomplete primary studies and 30% have finished secondary school (UNGS, 2003).

At the moment of its foundation, in 1993, UNGS highlighted the need of developing pedagogic strategies to enhance students' abilities in reading and writing in order to promote their success in obtaining a degree. As a result, two academic literacy courses have been implemented at the beginning of the university studies: the first of them as a mandatory condition to enter the university, as part of the University Adaptation Course (CAU); the second as a freshman subject that is part of the mandatory curriculum for all degrees.[1] These courses, the main goal of which is to develop students' skills in academic literacy, are taught by teachers of Spanish who hold university degrees and who also do research. Achievements in those mandatory courses, although very important, seem not to be enough to sustain five years of university studies, according to statements of professors and students themselves. First of all, texts students deal with during the first course have a low level of scientific or technical language, since the students can't yet handle more difficult academic texts. The second course—which meets thirty-two hours throughout the semester—offers them some examples of research articles from different disciplines and pays attention to structures and some prototypical formulations to be recognized in reading. It also reinforces some types of writing they have learned in previous courses. Students need to internalize generic models of academic writing, but this happens only after several opportunities to read and write them, which is not possible during the term of these two valuable experiences. On the other hand, academic activities increase in complexity through the university curriculum, demanding new genres not only to accomplish needs of the degree, but as preparation for professional life. These new genres—e.g., literature review, research projects, research reports, case analyses, and different types of professional reports—demand specific teaching-learning processes. Finally, the literature students have to read is highly specialized: they have to deal with density, abstraction, and technicality, specific grammar and discourse configurations as well as schematic structures they haven't experienced before (Halliday & Martin, 1993). It seemed to be necessary, therefore, to create a different stage of the teaching-learning process to meet the needs of students' academic literacy development.

After three (3) years of institutional negotiation, in February 2005 the Superior Council of the University, the higher collegiate organ of the university government, approved an institutional program with recurrent financial resources to promote students' increasing their academic and professional lit-

eracy. It was named "Program to Develop Academic Literacy across the Curriculum" (PRODEAC). [2]

PRODEAC'S FOUNDATION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAM

During 2002, professors of subject matter in the degrees of Engineering and Economy taught in the Institute of Industry [3](UNGS) decided to take into account aspects of the students' writing when marking their assessments, in order to contribute to the development of their academic skills. As these lecturers found difficulties in achieving their goals, at the end of the year the head of the Institute of Industry consulted Estela Moyano, researcher in academic discourse analysis and educational linguistics at the Institute of Human Development (UNGS). In February 2003, a project designed by Moyano for the Institute of Industry was submitted to the university government. The project consisted of a proposal of joint work between subject matter professors and a linguist in order to teach academic literacy inside the subject matter classes, doing with the students detailed and reflexive analyses of the genres they had to write, helping them to plan their texts and to edit them until they had a final version that was good enough to be graded. However, this first proposal failed: the university denied financial support for this Program.

During this period, groups of students from different Institutes asked for advice from Professor Moyano to solve problems they found during the course of earning their degrees: new challenges required the development of higher literacy skills. As more lecturers expressed the same concern, the heads of the other Institutes in the Degree Cycle started to be worried about this issue. Nevertheless, a second presentation of the same proposal made at the beginning of 2004 was also rejected.

Two events contributed to the success of the third and last submission in 2005: (1) the determination of the three Institutes in the Degree Cycle to support the proposal, but now as a program to be applied to all university degrees, and (2) the presentation of a letter from students of the four (4) Institutes, asking for more opportunities to develop literacy skills. It is clear that the process begun in 2002 brought about this effect: the Superior Council includes the chair of the university, the heads of the four institutes, and representatives of the different university clusters: professors and assistants, students and graduates, administrative staff. The proposal had been discussed by these actors in their role as councilors, and probably the discussions went beyond the council meetings, thus creating consensus.

In 2005, PRODEAC was installed in the Degree Cycle of all the degrees at the UNGS, under the condition that it had to be evaluated during its first application. Since then, it has been monitored by research-action projects.

THE PROGRAM

PRODEAC is based on Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Mattiessen, 2004), genre and discourse theory in this frame (Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2007 [2003]; 2008) and the Sydney School's pedagogic proposals (Martin, 1999; Martin & Rose, 2005) that have been adapted to Spanish and specific educational contexts (Moyano, 2007). It takes into account research on language of disciplines (Halliday & Martin, 1993; Martin & Veel, 1997; Wignell, 2007) and the dialogue between SFL and new Bernstenian sociology (Christie & Martin, 2007). The Program also acknowledges the very rich traditions of teaching academic writing and their theoretical bases in Writing Across the Curriculum, English for Specific Purposes, and experiences in Brazil and Argentina (Bazerman, Bonini & Figueredo, 2009; Carlino, 2005, 2006; Hyland, 2002; Hyon, 1996; Karwoski, Gaydeczka & Brito, 2006; McLeod & Soven, 1992; Swales, 1990; UNLu, 2001).

The Program assumes a collaborative design that includes linguists or language teachers[4] and lecturers of the specific subject matters of each degree curriculum. It carries out with students detailed and reflexive analysis of genres they have to write and the cultural contexts and social practices involved; it takes into account schematic structures of the texts and the characteristic uses of language in specific fields of knowledge.

Three main goals are pursued by PRODEAC: (a) to enlarge academic literacy abilities of students for improving their learning at the university and preparing them across the curriculum for future professional social activities; (b) to give assistance to lecturers of specific disciplines in planning and assessing written tasks proposed to students; (c) to prepare subject professors for teaching academic and professional literacy in their disciplines to impact the learning process and future professional performance. This work doesn't mean increasing curricular hours: the proposal implies doing the job as part of the subject and in the classes designed to teach its contents.

The modality of implementation supposes a partnership between a linguist/language teacher and a lecturer of a specific subject matter. These two actors are partners in the construction of particular activities in the class

that are agreed on in a statement, or "device," of negotiation between peers,[5] whereby the partners discuss the reading and writing tasks to be proposed to students, the nature of the genres and their structure as well as the participation of the linguist partner in some classes and the criteria for evaluating students' texts. Further study is made in the Program to describe the genres selected to teach and the vocabulary of disciplines in Spanish.

This pedagogical project allows the improvement of ways of communication through interaction between experts of different disciplines in order to initiate students in a discourse community (Swales, 1990) and to enrich the scope of genres written at the university. Moreover, this process makes possible a profile of graduates the UNGS is interested in producing: a professional used to working inside inter- or multi-disciplinary teams for intellectual or technical production. This Program contributes to knowledge construction in disciplines, ways of producing and comprehending discourse, and strategies for cooperative work by modeling and scaffolding.

The work of each linguist-and-subject-matter-lecturer team lasts three periods of six months, until the subject-matter lecturer is able to do the job on his/her own, consulting the PRODEAC team when needed. Then, a similar process starts in other subject matters, until the entire university educational offering is covered. Nevertheless, some activities with different actors become recurrent, to enlarge experience across time.

There is consensus regarding the need for institutional support to implement literacy programs across the curriculum (Carlino, 2005; UNLu, 2001). A program proposing collaborative work inside subjects requires a high degree of institutional compromise to accomplish its goals and promote changes in teaching of disciplines. In fact, several layers of institutional actors participate in the process of determining particular implementations of the program in each Institute, and in tailoring the distribution of applications according to the needs and possibilities of each degree.

SOME RESULTS OF APPLICATION

Since its first implementation, PRODEAC has grown in several respects: in its institutional relevance, in the subject lecturers' and students' generic and linguistic awareness, and in the progress of the linguist-partners in developing strategies of implementation as well as their knowledge of academic and professional genres and discourse.

Institutional Relevance

During the second semester of 2005, the first implementation of the Program took place in only six subjects of different degrees, while in the latest years PRODEAC has intervened in 20 subjects each semester, covering 16 of the 17 degrees offered in UNGS. This expansion has resulted from the high degree of institutionalization obtained and has been possible due to the creation of new posts of permanent researchers in linguistics that participate in the Program as linguist-partners. In 2005, the Program had assigned only two permanent researchers and two hired ad hoc language teachers; there are currently 7 researchers and two hired language teachers.

Subject Matter Lecturers

At the beginning of the implementation of the Program, most of the subject matter lecturers had been in some way compelled by authorities of the Institutes to participate in the Program. In many cases, they were reluctant to increase or systematize writing tasks across the subjects. The activities they usually proposed to students consisted of applying formulae, answering lists of questions, or writing traditional exams, with the only purpose being evaluation of knowledge reproduction. Most of these lecturers had low expectations of the possibility that their students could write long and complex texts in the subject. On the other hand, some expressed belief that genre-based teaching would limit students' creativity or freedom in writing. These kinds of resistance to the Program came from naturalized assumptions about the writing process and about teaching reading and writing that differed from the principles proposed by PRODEAC.

During the second semester of application in a subject some changes were noticed in lecturers' attitudes: they decided to demand more and different written tasks from students; for example, to produce more complex genres. These changes have been attributed to two main factors: (1) their finding students notably improved in their writing abilities because of their participation with the Program in teaching activities, and (2) the development of generic and linguistic awareness due to the negotiation process with their partner (Moyano, 2009; Natale, 2007; Natale & Moyano, 2006). At that point, the subject lecturers started to value in a positive way the role of the knowledge of genres in accomplishing social practices, especially for academic and workplace activities (Moyano, Natale & Valente, 2007). Due to this evolution, there is progress in performing the negotiation, which in turn impacts the process of collaborative teaching of literacy.

In fact, after one or two participations in the Program, some subject professors have made significant progress in relevant awareness. Consequently, they

started to intervene productively earlier in the teaching-learning process proposed by PRODEAC and were able to take on the teaching alone after the first cycle of collaboration. Nevertheless, lecturers can always consult with the PRODEAC team when needed, and may ask for a new intervention after a while. Also to speed the learning process, other professors have written descriptions of genres or materials for written tasks, and these have been prepared by the linguist-partners as bibliography in their subject matter programs.

Students

Students who have participated in the Program have experienced similar evolution. Although some of them recognized their need for systematic assistance in writing academic texts, others at first expressed that the Program meant an "extra load" to their duties. Their concern about writing had to do with the "content" of the texts, in the traditional sense of the term, disregarding the influence of writing on their process of construing knowledge. Nevertheless, their texts presented problems in both form and content. After several participations in the Program, when they could appreciate the benefits they received from the kind of intervention involved and their own progress in writing, students began to give positive value to PRODEAC and showed increasing understanding of the meaning of writing in disciplines.

These reactions have been observed through the consultations the students made in class as well as the comments they made on the texts of other students and on their own texts after a learning process. Students' awareness increased from considering graphical aspects and formalities of presentation (e.g., number of pages) to taking into account matters of information flow or register. They started to pay attention to social context and the need of adjusting discourse to it, the structure of the text, the kinds of information to include, and its organization. Moreover, they start to make spontaneous demands on such complex genres as research projects or reports and show awareness of some characteristics of written mode and particularities of language of different disciplines. This level of consciousness has consequences in the evolution of their abilities in writing (Giudice, Natale & Stagnaro, 2008; Giudice, 2009a, 2009b; Giudice & Moyano, 2009; Stagnaro & Natale, 2009).

PRODEAC Language Teachers

One challenge of the Program is the special training of the teachers of Spanish involved, who are expected to be familiar with descriptions of academic and professional genres and with accurate strategies for teaching academic and pro-

fessional literacy in different areas of knowledge. As linguists, they need to be capable of doing further and detailed descriptions of those genres and specialized language in Spanish. They also need interpersonal and professional skills to participate in the negotiation device and to respond to lecturers' and students' demands in a productive way.

This profile is not easy to find, so the Program provides space for discussion in seminars, where members of the team share their experiences in different interventions, descriptions of the genres the students were asked to write, progress made in negotiating with subject lecturers, and problems in written texts of the students involved and improvements made by them. These instances make room for collective knowledge construction about matters related to PRODEAC, its development, and systematic work.

CONCLUSIONS

PRODEAC has been designed with the main goals of promoting improved students' performance in the university and preparing them for professional lives. According to Systemic Functional Linguistics theories of language, culture, knowledge construction, and learning, these goals are related to development of meaning potential and academic literacy skills.

The Program's original features include involving institutional actors of different hierarchies and disciplines, who provide institutional support of different kinds. The high commitment shown by these diverse individuals has been possible due to the fact that one of the main concerns of UNGS is to develop pedagogical tools, including reading and writing programs, which contribute to education of students who have grown up in disadvantaged social contexts (Coraggio, 1994).

This institutional support allowed the Program to expand their application field from six subject matters in the first semester of intervention to 20 in each of the latest semesters. In order to promote this expansion, the institution provided funding to create posts in PRODEAC to incorporate researcher-professors in linguistics. This action resulted in the formation of a group that controls the activities and ways of intervention and produces knowledge about different relevant aspects: e.g., accuracy of the pedagogic proposal, genre descriptions, features of academic writing in Spanish, evolution of students' abilities in academic and professional literacy, and evolution of linguistic and generic awareness by different disciplines' lecturers. Some of these developments have been made in the frame of new research projects in UNGS and in association with universities from abroad.

The challenge now is to continue research to improve performance in all the mentioned aspects of the Program, to produce teaching materials and publish them on the PRODEAC website,[6] and to produce knowledge about the languages of disciplines in Spanish as well as in other academic and professional genres.[7]

NOTES

1. Complete degrees in Argentina last five years or 10 semesters. In the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, each degree has two cycles: the General University Cycle (the first five semesters) and the Degree Cycle (5 semesters more), with exception made for Teaching Degrees for the Secondary School Level, for which the Degrees Cycle lasts three semesters. Before starting their studies, students have to pass a mandatory University Adaptation Course (CAU), consisting of three subjects: Mathematics, Science, and a 92-hour Reading & Writing course (cf. http://www.ungs.edu.ar/areas/in_oferta_academica/n/academic-offer-.html).

2. The name of the Program in Spanish is "Programa de Desarrollo de Habilidades de Lectura y Escritura Académicas a lo largo de la Carrera".

3. UNGS is not organized in faculties but in institutes. One of them, the Institute of Sciences, is part of the General University Cycle of all the degrees and the other three are the responsibility of the Degrees Cycle, according to groups of degrees: Institute of Industry, Institute of Metropolitan Area Studies, and Institute of Human Development (cf. http://www.ungs.edu.ar/areas/in_inicio/n/home.html).

4. In Argentina, teachers of Spanish working at the university level must have at least a university degree or equivalent qualifications. Most of them (all of them at UNGS) are devoted to research in linguistics, applied linguistics, or literature.

5. For detailed description of the Negotiation device, see Moyano (2009; 2010).

6. http://www.ungs.edu.ar/prodeac/

7. For a more detailed explanation of further challenges, see Moyano (2010); Vian Jr., Anglada, Moyano & Romero (2009).

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