Invisible Writing: An Exploration of Attitudes towards Undergraduate Use of Standard Written English in UK Higher Education

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Abstract

Joan Turner (2004) suggests that for some students language only becomes 'visible' as a problem. With the expansion of UK higher education, more students will be discriminated against as their written language becomes *visible*. Recent scholarship recognises different literacies that students bring to higher education (Lea and Street 2000) and advocates moving away from a skills approach towards one which centres on how writers make meaning. This article endorses this positive progression from the 'student deficit' model but argues for an honest assessment of how students who do not already produce Standard Written English (Elbow 2000) can make their writing *invisible* so that readers are not distracted by 'surface' elements of the writing. Using empirical evidence and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital', it addresses a reluctance or inability to develop pedagogical solutions to a problem which is rooted in a persistently elitist and gate-keeping model of higher education.

The UK higher education system has seen a massive expansion over the last thirty years. This expansion means that the students who enter higher education are different to the elite student body of the past. One of the ways in which they differ is often their command of 'Standard Written English' (SWE) which Peter Elbow defines as 'the usage, grammar, syntax, punctuation and spelling that will pass muster with most university faculty […] as correct or at least acceptable' (2000: 324). Joan Turner, in the context of English for Academic Purposes, discusses 'The Visibility of Language' and maintains that for some students 'language only becomes "visible" as a problem' (2004: 99). The present article uses the term 'invisible writing' to explore the tensions in the UK higher education system relating to attitudes towards students whose written language is made *visible* through differences to SWE. It uses empirical evidence from a longitudinal research study carried out in a UK university to question how these students can develop their writing skills in order for their writing to become *invisible* so as not to interfere with the reader's perception of their academic ability. It also uses Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' to discuss any assumptions behind those reader perceptions.

In the Royal Literary Fund report, *Writing Matters*, Wall describes spelling, punctuation and grammar as 'the fundamentals of literacy' (2006: xi) but in the summary of his introduction in the Preface, the word used is 'basics' (Davies, Swinburne and Williams 2006: viii). This paper argues that with respect to literacy there is a significant difference between 'fundamental' and 'basic'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2010), the former means something which 'form[s] an essential or indispensable part of a system'; the latter term, although it can also be defined as fundamental, has a secondary meaning of 'a limited, "essential" vocabulary in any language' and is often linked with the word 'surface' as denoting something less significant. Research on academics' feedback on student writing often suggests that too much emphasis is put on 'surface features' (Glover and Brown 2006: 14). Contrasting 'deep', 'higher order' and 'important' features of writing with those which are deemed 'basic' and 'surface'[1] reinforces the perception that attention to transcriptional[2] writing skills is low

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of this tendency with examples, see Hill (2008: 55).

level work with no place in higher education. It is difficult to see, in this context, what motivation higher education students might have to put effort into these areas of writing. Terms such as 'surface' and 'basic' preserve the perception that these conventions are normal, easily attainable and unimportant, whereas they can be discriminatory, hard to attain, and crucial to success, not only in the academic world but also in the work place (Hadley 2007).

This paper firstly considers the context of formal writing in higher education. It then draws on a longitudinal research project which focused on the development of transcriptional elements of undergraduate writing; the project relied on the collection and analysis of a large sample of written data, alongside written tutor feedback, from 15 undergraduates studying English or Media at the University of Huddersfield.[3] Although it offers no simple solution, this paper argues for more openness in dealing with writing as a social system where 'visible' writing differences are used to discriminate, and an acknowledgement of the complexity that students face in minimising these differences.

The attitudes of academics towards student writers who do not conform to notions of SWE appear to range from those who would exclude them from higher education (Thornton and Coppard 2006), often based on a perceived link between their writing and cognitive ability (Lillis 2001: 39–40), to those who tolerate non-standard usage in the belief that content and meaning are far more important. Although disagreeing strongly with the former, this paper contends that tolerance in these circumstances is loaded with a similar cultural and ideological significance to that which writers such as Ghassan Hage (2000) apply to racial 'tolerance'. In order to be tolerant, one must have the power to accept or reject and therefore must also have the power to be intolerant. Hage suggests that the promotion of 'tolerance' obscures the fact that only those with power can be tolerant and does nothing to challenge 'their *capacity* to exercise this power' (2000: 87). He maintains that 'it is a strategy aimed at reproducing and disguising relationships of power in society (2000: 87). In the same sense of disguise, tolerating non-standard English in a higher education setting ignores the social aspects of writing.

One of the important social aspects of this debate is 'credibility'. In making judgements based on the writing of a person, the reader is, consciously or not, assessing that writer in terms of reliability and authority. These judgements on writing are based on individual notions of 'appropriateness' or 'correctness' but as Fairclough points out in his work on language and power: '[w]henever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects' (1989: 23). Judgements are often social rather than based on any genuinely intrinsic superiority of one language form over another. They are made, as Joan Turner puts it, 'despite the arbitrary nature of rules of language use' (1999: 38). Deborah Cameron makes the same point in a slightly different way:

> I still find there are things that leap to my eye as if emblazoned in neon. I can choose to suppress the irritation I feel when I see, for example, a sign that reads 'Potatoe's'; I cannot choose not to feel it (1995: 14).

As Turner and Cameron illustrate, even those who are sensitive to language discrimination and who are prepared to respect all dialects will still make a judgement based on individual language use; they have 'internalized certain norms to such an extent that [they are] no longer capable of experiencing them as arbitrary (Cameron 1995: 14). Whilst fully endorsing a view of writing as a complex process which needs to be viewed in terms of the student writer's attempt to make meaning, the very nature of writing as a social practice, which Lillis (2001) explains so compellingly, means that we cannot afford to ignore these visible or 'surface' features. The power relationships inherent in the notion of different discourse practices means that these features are used as a relatively straightforward process of discrimination; removing this difference would present real challenges for the present higher education system, as discrimination against non-standard writing is both explicit and implicit.

Criteria for written work often have some reference to the standard of writing; in my own institution one example would be: 'There are certain qualities which we expect to find in good writing […]

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[2] This follows Hinkle (1997) where writing was divided into two areas: **compositional** (organisation, style, content) and **transcriptional** (spelling, punctuation, grammar).
[3] All of the students have English as their first language.

Conventions – this includes the use of standard English grammar, spelling [and] punctuation' (University of Huddersfield, *English Studies Student Handbook*, 2007: 38). According to Sadler, such criteria are there to help students 'to shape their work intelligently and appropriately while it is being developed' (2005: 178). For students whose command of the conventions of SWE is limited, this 'appropriate development' would inevitably necessitate learning taking place, particularly within the first year. If higher education assessment is meant to assess what is taught and learned at this level, and the requirement for SWE is a criterion of assessment, then it follows that those who do not start their course with the ability to engage in this dominant literacy practice need to be given the opportunity to achieve it within their degree course (Catt and Gregory 2006). Otherwise, students are being assessed in relation to the 'cultural capital'[4] that they bring with them and the gulf between these students and those whose social background provides them with practice that conforms to the dominant group will be maintained.

In making Standard English (SE) one of the requirements for acceptable formal writing, we, as academics or employers, are also saying something of the type of person we require – essentially, one of 'us' (Duszak 2002: 1), or as Gee puts it, a member of 'our social or cultural group' (Gee 1996: 69).This cultural dimension to writing cannot be ignored. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) discusses language in terms of a 'linguistic market' where some have more 'capital' than others through virtue of their background. Michael Grenfell (1998) defines three terms: 'habitus', 'field' and 'capital', which are important in any practical application of Bourdieu's ideas. Grenfell maintains that these terms can be used to show that 'human action is constituted through a dialectical relationship between individuals' thought and activity and the objective world' (1998: 14), so there is constant negotiation involved. This is important because it supports the notion that our hegemonic or hierarchical educational and social systems are not static but can be challenged and changed (Janks and Ivanič 1992: 315). As Melanie Walker explains, 'capital is arbitrary and the determination of what capital is valued is constantly being defined and redefined' (2004: 38). Bourdieu describes habitus as 'an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 95). This is significant in that the habitus which enables us to adapt our writing to the situation and audience has built up over a number of years and is used largely unconsciously (Grenfell 1998: 14 and Lillis 2001: 34). Even though most writers will usually edit and proof-read formal writing, the conscious effort is underpinned and inextricably linked to an unconscious knowing of what is appropriate and what is not.

Although habitus relates to individuals, the practices do not stand in isolation; there is always a social context. Bourdieu's terms 'field' and 'capital' relate to this; within specific social contexts or 'fields', different types of capital can be converted, so that in the context of higher education 'cultural capital', the ability to conform to the conventions of SWE, can contribute to 'symbolic capital', accumulated prestige or honour, and also 'economic capital' (Thompson 1991: 14) for students, in terms of a better degree classification and a better job upon graduation. Those who have this capital (most academics fall into this category) may not perceive it as such because, to use Bourdieu's term, it is 'misrecognised' as the norm. Furthermore, Bourdieu suggests that this system can only work if those who are disadvantaged by it also recognise it as the norm:

> Social order owes some measure of its permanence to the fact that it imposes schemes of classification which, being adjusted to objective classifications, produce a form of recognition of this order, the kind implied by the misrecognition of the arbitrariness of its foundations (Bourdieu 1991: 127).

Arbitrariness in language is often discussed in English and Media Courses with reference to the Structuralist view advocated by Ferdinand de Saussure.[5] It might even be used to question the notion of the value of and the need for SWE, but it does so within a framework that constantly reinforces the prestige of SWE by its use and acceptance in every area of academic discourse. The use of formal SWE is a fundamental example of a sign that connotes membership of a particular social group or, perhaps more accurately, the use of non-standard forms is a clear sign that one does not belong to that particular group. In higher education there is some discussion about the importance of conforming to SWE requirements, and there is a growing condemnation of the tendency to label a

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[4] See discussion below.
[5] See for instance Jeffries (1998).

lack of these conventions as 'failure' (Hillsdon 1999: 93 and Lillis 2001: 27). Unfortunately, the latter stance can also draw attention away from the consequences of difference.

It is crucial to discuss and debate issues of power in relation to writing conventions, but what also needs to be recognised is that in the lifetime of current students it is very unlikely that there will be a massive shift towards accepting non-standard writing as equal in value to conventional forms. The system, as Bourdieu's theory suggests, is maintained by those who benefit from it and even by those who lose by it. It follows, then, that even if students are introduced to the concept of gatekeeping through convention, they also need to be given the opportunity to acquire the key.

Proponents of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) also argue that simply making students aware of the position 'is not liberatory enough' (Janks and Ivanič 1992: 305). They suggest that once students are made more aware of a system that regards their choice of language as non-standard then that system can be challenged, as even a hegemonic or hierarchical system is susceptible to change and 'subject to social forces' (Janks and Ivanič 1992: 315). The examples they give include 'working-class people publishing in their own vernacular' (Janks and Ivanič 1992: 315). They discuss the importance of the 'socio-historical context' of this vernacular and contend that 'every individual choice helps to shape the future possibilities for others' (Janks and Ivanič 1992: 317). The interesting word here is 'choice'. Only knowledge gives choice. Many people have no choice other than writing in the vernacular, and even the terminology 'their vernacular' has connotations of 'us' and 'them' (Duszak 2002: 1). The concentrated, demanding work needed to change adult literacy practices, thus giving a genuine choice, is far too often dismissed as if it were a simple case of picking up new knowledge rather than changing the habits of a lifetime. The suggestion that students should have the 'choice' (Janks and Ivanič 1992: 317) of using SWE can unintentionally minimise the immense problems many students face in isolating and changing features of their written language which could be identified as non-standard.

Partly in order to document such problems, a longitudinal study was carried out at the University of Huddersfield (Hill 2008). Over three years, samples of written work, including any written feedback, were collected from 15 undergraduates studying English or Media.[6] Although the command of writing conventions is important for any undergraduate, it was felt that it was even more crucial for students in these disciplines. The resulting data was scrutinised and quantitatively analysed in terms of changes in students' spelling, punctuation and grammar. Perceived errors per 1,000 words were charted for each semester. The resulting graphs were used to give a visual representation of any changes for individual students over six semesters.[7] Interviews with students were used to inform this analysis and to illustrate some of the problems involved in acquiring SWE in higher education. Although Glover and Brown (2006) suggested that too much emphasis was put on 'surface features' in academics' feedback on student writing, my research suggests that this happens mainly in students' first year of study and that the quality and usefulness of such feedback is variable. Copious advice in handbooks and written feedback such as 'Watch your grammar' and 'You need to look at punctuation' does not appear to engender positive changes in writing practice. Even where detailed feedback and access to good resources were given, there was not clear, consistent improvement (see Fig. 1) as there were found to be other relevant factors such as lack of motivation, lack of understanding and competing priorities (Hill 2008). Feedback in students' second and third years of study was much more content-oriented (Hill 2008: Chapter 5). This can lead students to believe that they have succeeded in meeting conventional requirements for formal writing or that these requirements are not important. These statements, made by students in my interviews with them about their writing assignments, are typical:

> Those are just spelling mistakes and punctuation.

> I'm not worried [about my errors] because the knowledge is there.

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[6] Resources did not allow for a probability sample that could claim to be quantitatively representative of the whole of the undergraduate population (Cohen and Manion 1994). Instead, a 'judgement sample' (Shipman 1997) was used based on a 'convenience' model (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight 1996). See Hill (2008) for more detail on methodology.
[7] See Fig. 1 for example.

> I think 'Oh I've got the information in'. You sort of think you can get away with [how it's written] (Student interviews, Hill: 2008).

Great strides have been made by theorists such as Crème (1999), Lea and Street (1998), and Lillis (2001) in identifying how the hierarchies of power in academia are manifested in the setting and marking of student writing. These theorists identify and expose the inherent inequalities in a higher education system that maintains such power through mystification and implicitness rather than through explicit and relevant teaching of academic writing practices. This shift, intentionally or not, tends to minimise the importance of competence in formal SE as a social marker or a source of 'capital' in higher education and graduate employment. In doing so, it maintains the establishment of a discourse community from which those students who cannot conform are excluded. It is rightly suggested that the 'academic literacies' approach moves to a new 'level of engagement with student writing, as opposed to the more straightforward study skills and academic socialization approaches' (Lea and Street 2000: 35). Lea and Street suggest that the 'crudity' and 'insensitivity' of the study skills approach was followed by 'academic socialization' which relies upon notions of appropriate writing for a particular purpose. Their proposed 'academic literacies' framework encapsulates these two approaches, thus allowing for 'a more complex and contested interpretation' (Lea and Street 2000: 44). There is a danger, however, that in focusing on this new approach, valuable work done through these 'more straightforward' (Lea and Street 2000: 35) skills and socialization approaches is minimised or discounted.

If non-standard features in student writing were neutralised by being made invisible through conformity (Elbow 1998: 168, Turner 2000: 150), it would force the reader into more engagement with the content and meaning within the writing. It would challenge those academics who rely on any deviation from their notion of 'standard' as a tool to differentiate students. It would also deny them the opportunity to equate different writing practices with impaired cognitive ability. As Mina Shaughnessy said 40 years ago, 'errors reflect […] linguistic situation, not […] educability' (1977: 121). Higher education's requirement for the conventions of SWE in student writing is 'misrecognised' as 'legitimate' and therefore largely unquestioned (Bourdieu 1991: 153), but negative feedback on errors is not an adequate framework for teaching and learning these *fundamental* literacy practices.

In rightly dismissing the notion that 'if students learn to spell and/or punctuate they will be literate at last' (Nightingale 1988: 265), many researchers over the last twenty years also appear to dismiss the notion that without being able to spell and punctuate following the prevalent conventions, students may not be deemed sufficiently literate to be regarded as part of the academic discourse community, even if their other writing and thinking skills have been greatly enhanced as they have progressed through higher education. I contend that the current tendency to consider 'basic skills' or 'surface features' of writing as easy to acquire and unworthy of attention can be as damaging as the tendency to concentrate solely on these features as the markers of 'good' writing.

My research illustrates that for students whose schema for writing diverges from SWE, the reviewing process is much more crucial than it would be in the case of an accomplished SE writer. Not only must they check if the final piece conveys understanding of the content in a logical and coherent way but also that it follows all of the necessary conventions for this particular piece of academic writing. As has been established in recent research (Creme and Lea 1999 and Lillis and Turner 2001) these conventions can vary not only within disciplines but also from task to task; they are often not made explicit and can differ from those that the student has previously experienced. Added to this, my research shows that they have to negotiate differences from SWE that they might not even recognise and, even if they do, are not sure how to correct:

> It's pretty depressing really and I try my best but I don't seem to know what they [academics] want and they don't all want the same thing.

> I do struggle with my grammar and punctuation definitely [...] I do not understand semi-colons and I do not understand apostrophes (Student interviews, Hill: 2008).

Under these circumstances, the lack of compliance with conventions is often not related to lack of time and effort but to confusion about exactly what is required and what is important, and, in some cases, a lack of the specific knowledge necessary to conform.

Students in my data sample were required to write between 20,000 and 25,000 words in their first year of study. This included assignments classified under headings of essay, annotated bibliography, bibliography of enquiry, journalistic piece, report, close analysis, test, text analysis, documentary analysis, critique, summary, transcription, log, review, poetry, short story and commentary.[8] It could be argued that the conventions of formal SWE are required in all writing at this level but where students are struggling to assimilate sometimes quite subtle differences in requirements it is understandable that their concentration is not always focussed on these: 'Some of the stuff is a bit hard to get your head round' (Student interview, Hill: 2008). As Kellogg explains:

> The task environment shapes the allocation of attention. It includes the intended audience, the writing assignment that specifies the topic, the reason for writing, and the rewards and punishments associated with doing a good or poor job (1999: 32).

This reference to 'rewards and punishments' emphasises the point that motivation is an extremely significant factor in the learning process. This is not a simple case of whether or not a student who wants to do well will put in the necessary time and effort to achieve success. Motivation is linked to many issues, including aspirations, self-esteem, confidence and fear of failure (Child 1981: 33–57). My research shows that if a student has previously attained satisfactory marks, within their own and other's expectations, the motivation to do the necessary work to improve their writing, especially regarding something which is regarded as low level learning, may not be high:

> Do you know exactly what's wrong with your punctuation?
> No, not really. I'm not sure about commas and my sentences run on a bit
> Do you think about checking the punctuation specifically when you proofread?
> No. I just check it for spelling and if things sound right.
> How do you think you could improve it?
> I don't know really. We never really did much on punctuation and grammar at
> school (Student interview, Hill: 2008).

This student knew that his punctuation was not standard and that he made several slips in grammar but, largely based on content, his marks were generally in the high 2.2 or low 2.1 band, which is where he expected to be, so motivation to commit the time and effort needed to improve his writing practices was minimal.

Another student in the sample, who said that she had really tried to improve her punctuation over three years of university study, still struggled. Quantitative data shows that she did improve but when the pressure was on, in her final year, her punctuation began to deteriorate again (see Fig. 1).
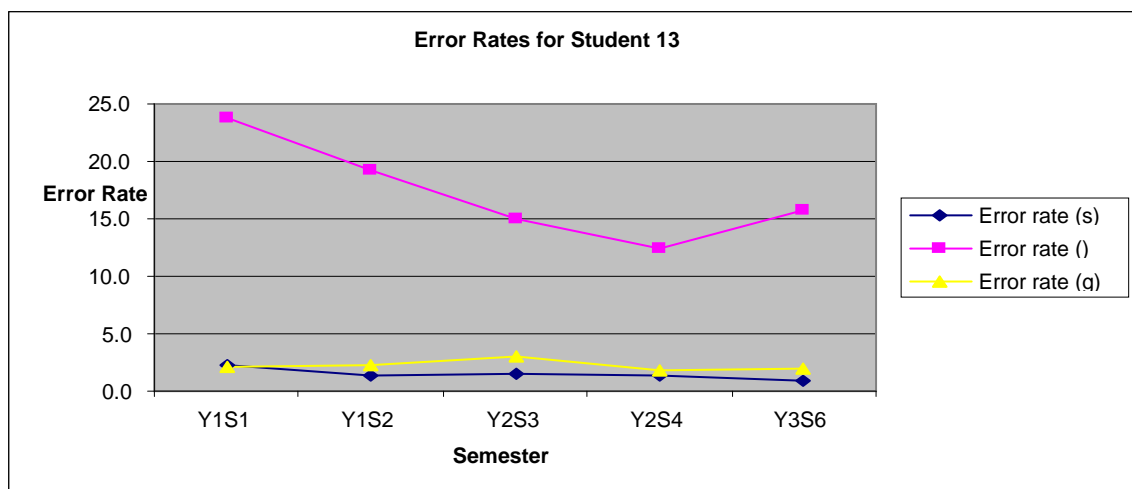

Figure 1: Error rate for Student 13 (Hill: 2008).

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[8] In her report on the teaching of academic writing, Ganobcsik-Williams cited 64 separate writing tasks that students may be asked to perform (2004: 14).

This emphasises the fact that she had not internalised the practices and had to rely on close editing. Those who do have the dominant writing practices as part of their schema for writing cannot always recognise how difficult it can be to change writing habits, and that there are many issues involved in the learning process.

There is no easy solution to this problem, but critical thinking on the part not only of students but also of academics is crucial to this debate. Open acknowledgement of writing as a social system that separates, and of the advantages of SE, should be part of the curriculum for any university degree which relies on formal written communication as an assessment tool. There is no need for writing development to be remedial or stigmatized; it should be a positive process.[9] Students who already have the advantages of this 'capital' can still be introduced to theoretical and ideological elements of the debate on the importance of SWE in their writing. This has to be aligned with motivational strategies to make working towards achieving 'invisible writing' a priority in the first year. Embedding development within modules, genuinely formative feedback, peer involvement and a variety of resources can all be brought to bear, but it is only through engaging individual students and academics in the idea that this is a worthwhile use of their time and energy that these strategies will be successful, and that inherent elitism as manifested in expectations of student writing will be challenged.

[9] The Speak-Write Programme at Anglia Polytechnic University (Avery and Bryan 1998) is a good example of a positive strategy.

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