

Challenges Facing International Students in Writing Academic Essays*

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Abstract

The current international situation is reflected in our educational settings, where increasing numbers of students study across the boundaries of countries. Large numbers of international students are especially involved in higher education. This paper illustrates what kind of difficulties students from non-English speaking backgrounds have in writing academic essays, one of the compulsory assignments in most anglophone higher education, by using three categories: culture, content and language.

This also leads to a discussion of how these students might be helped to overcome these difficulties. In conclusion, some suggestions about the need for collaborative academic environments and institutional support, such as pre-session courses, are made.

1. Introduction

Academic essay writing is clearly the most important prerequisite for studying successfully in anglophone higher education, and in particular in postgraduate courses in British universities where written assignments are a compulsory part of all courses (Bloor & Bloor, 1991). Essay writing, it will be readily agreed, is a common obstacle for all students, whether they are students from non-English speaking backgrounds or not. However, from my point of view as a Japanese with experience in studying in a M.A. course in the U.K., in addition to language, there seem to be quite a lot of differences in strategies in academic essay writing from Japan.

It is likely that if overseas students have not had any instruction using some sort of academic writing model applicable to the U.K., they cannot give full scope to their ability. They need to be provided with a better study environment. Therefore, it is certain that overseas students need to have good support from their institutional administrations (Bloor and Bloor, 1991; Flowerdew, 1993; Cammish, 1997).

This paper will firstly attempt to establish the difficulties of overseas students in academic essay writing, and will go on to examine the possible ways to overcome these difficulties. As Hounsell (1987) points out, essay writing in the academic context is not only a central assessment activity but also a comprehensive learning activity.

While it is by no means easy to classify difficulties and divide them into various types, I have identified three categories for discussion: 'Culture', 'Content' and 'Language'.

I would like to examine each of these areas of difficulty in turn and try to find some solutions.

2 : Categories : problems and solutions

2.1 : 'Culture'.

First, I will start by tackling issues of culture. Culture both reflects people's ways of thinking and living, and forms people's value judgements and social norms. When considering cultural difficulties in academic essay writing in English, it seems

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that there is a cross-cultural issue involved. Language is a part of culture. When people write, their writing inevitably reflects their culture. Furthermore, educational, social and political systems are the most important factors in the construction of values. Therefore, it is clear that overseas students' backgrounds vary to a large extent. From this perspective, it can be said that international students have difficulties in terms of the differences in cultural and educational background.

Bloor & Bloor (1991) surveyed overseas students at the University of Warwick and indicated that 50 percent had expected to be assessed on the basis of objective examinations, not written term assignments. This shows that overseas students might feel bewildered by the different evaluation systems of educational institutions. Furthermore, by considering one particular case of a student with writing problems, Bloor & Bloor (1991) illustrate the complexity of the problem: the student (who had been successful in her previous educational experience) was puzzled by the different educational structure and system in the U.K. and suffered from a misunderstanding of the purpose of academic essay writing. Finally her personal tutor dismissed her as "a bundle of trouble who worries about nothing and just needs to work a lot harder" (Bloor & Bloor, 1991, 3).

The crucial problem that this student had was misunderstanding; in other words, she believed that she should be given the right answer of the topic which was required to be argued in the essay, just the same as she was given the answer of exam questions at home. Unfortunately, she could not understand that the purpose of writing essays in the U.K. is not only to show what students know the facts but to show what students have read and thought about the topic (Groom, 2000; Bloor and Bloor, 1991).

To minimize this disadvantage in evaluation and to have overseas students' faculties develop, it may be useful to provide some instruction beforehand. As Bloor & Bloor (1991,1) note, "A good pre-session course will help to correct the more erroneous of these expectations and give the students a more general understanding of what type of writing tasks will be expected of them in their departments, but initially students from different countries have widely differing expectations about even the amount of writing that will be demanded of them." It is very important, therefore, to educate students from the outset concerning the objectives of the course, to let them understand what kind of difference they should accept and follow and what is the role that is expected of them as much as possible (Flowerdew, 1993).

At the same time, however, the cross-cultural issue is surely not irrelevant to the sub-cultural one. Something else to be borne in mind here is that one-sided instruction may not be effective (Cammish, 1997). It is essential that tutors perceive the equal importance of cultures other than anglophone culture, and to provide a give-and-take atmosphere so as not to have student misapprehensions. This is one more thing that has been demonstrated in the survey of Bloor & Bloor (1991): the problem resulting from tutors lacking an understanding of the educational systems and cultures of their students and consequently never developing a collaborative relationship with them. If the tutors had found the students' difficulty and given her enough explanation, she would not have been dismissed. It is important to pay attention to students' previous educational experience (Mohan and Lo, 1985).

I infer that, in the same way as overseas students, home students without any experience of study in higher education and any knowledge of academic essay writing

may also need some instruction of academic essay writing beforehand. That is to say, not only overseas students but also home students have the same kinds of difficulties. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that, having good instruction and collaborative relationships with tutors in pre-sessional EAP courses helps overseas students overcome the disadvantages caused by cross-cultural factors to some extent.

2.2 : 'Content'

As Mohan and Lo (1985, 515) point out, "a special feature of academic writing is the importance of discourse organization." Here, again, the primary consideration in difficulties of development in the ability to produce academic discourse should be the backgrounds of overseas students. In describing their difficulties of content development caused by their backgrounds, it seems to be necessary to distinguish two phases: cross-cultural problems and methodological problems.

Just as the cultural problem outlined in the previous section can cause problems of expectations, cultural differences may also lead to several misunderstandings of content development. Some cultures favor styles and rhetorical structures that might differ to some extent from the current paradigm of academic writing in English (Bloor & Bloor, 1991). That good writing in English consists of paraphrases, in-text summaries, repetitions and so on, may not always be true in different languages. To have sufficient knowledge of the academic discourse community in English might be a good step towards a firmer mastery of academic writing skills. For this reason, pre-sessional EAP programs may play an important role.

On the other hand, Bloor & Bloor (1991) also note that, in spite of general acknowledgement that academic writing is 'impersonal and factual', a number of genres in English are rich in hedged propositions. That is to say, favorable contents might differ depending on subjects such as history, social science and economics. Therefore, it is safer to have individual course tutors' instructions as to the required contents of writing.

Over and above this, Mohan and Lo (1985) argue against the belief of Kaplan (1966) that unique paragraph order in rhetoric of each language and culture leads to problems of organization in English academic writing by ESL students. They go on to suggest that the influence of the first language is not an important factor at the rhetorical level of writing. They note that students' native literacy is one of the most important factors influencing the academic writing. In fact, to organize and express ideas on an individual basis is indispensable.

Up to this point I have largely argued against the importance of cross-cultural problems in developing academic essay writing. However, it is clear that tutors' forthcoming support in EAP programs and in-sessional workshops are crucial for overseas students. As Hounsell (1987, 118) points out, "A more open, collaborative and process-oriented approach, designed to bring essay writing into the mainstream of day-to-day teaching, would seem highly desirable."

In addition to content problems, there are a number of methodological problems, such as handling large reading lists, poor reading and listening skills, and difficulties organizing ideas. Indeed, because of the disadvantage in language, it is obvious that overseas students need to make all possible effort to manage to read a lot of books and journals. These are problems that they cannot avoid. For developing their own ideas and critical point of view, they need to get information and knowledge through

reading. Moreover, becoming accustomed to reading leads them to overcome their poor reading and writing skills as well.

As for reading, there are several skills involved, such as skimming and scanning. Without any doubt, to acquire these skills is of great value. Yet, students have to be careful in practice and try to avoid misinterpretations. According to Cammish (1997, 143), “...for many students, language is a core problem. Coping with living in a different culture and learning through the medium of a second or foreign language can indeed feel as though one is ‘see [ing] through a glass darkly’ ...” To pursue their theme safely and effectively, I would suggest that students should make peer groups. It is likely that peer groups would provide good opportunities for mutual support and to exchange and develop ideas, make sure of understandings about what has been read, practice presentations, save reading time and minimize the various mental and physical burdens. Through cooperative relationships among classmates, students may develop sophisticated ideas, and their academic lives might thus be much more successful and enjoyable. Good collaborations with tutors and also with classmates might be the right solution to overcome difficulties of overseas students in content development.

2.3 : ‘Language’

Although there are various kinds of challenges for overseas students, in general, it can be said that Language – in other words, English – is likely to be the main area of difficulty to be overcome. As I argued in the previous stage, overseas students need to have collaborative relationships with tutors and classmates for many reasons. Collaborative relationships are very effective in helping students to make up for their disadvantages in terms of language. From this perspective, especially in academic essay writing, not only writing but also listening and speaking ability might play important roles.

One more thing I would like to examine here is styles of language instruction.

Mohan and Lo (1985, 515) observed overseas students’ previous educational backgrounds and noted that, “a lot of second language learners have difficulties with academic writing in English. Some of these difficulties are sentence-level problems with grammar and vocabulary.” By comparing the strategies of learning English between native speakers and non-native speakers, Mohan and Lo (1985) found that there is a clear difference. That is, the second language learner of English has an instruction that is sentence based, while the native student has a content based one. This explanation convinced me that overseas students had been taught English as an object of study, not as a medium for expressing ideas. It seems that there is a limit of improvement to learn English as a subject. To improve and acquire better command of English, it can be said that it is the best way for overseas students to study something *using* English as a medium to express their ideas. In this sense academic essay writing is a very good and effective exercise.

However, even when overseas students are in good environments to improve their English ability, basically, a high degree of English proficiency is an essential requisite for the entry to anglophone higher education institutions. Therefore continuous, regular effort will be necessary.

3 Conclusion

I have proposed that international students have difficulties which include three

different but interrelated fields. While some might argue that such a categorization is artificial and thus nonsensical, I believe that the distinctions highlight an essential feature of academic essay writing. This is that academic essay writing in anglophone higher education is not only a central assessment activity but also a comprehensive learning activity which shows students' broader mastery of a discipline. According to Hounsell (1987), since academic essay writing is a private and solitary activity, it thus appears to be a central assessment activity but a peripheral pedagogical one. Therefore as an evaluation of what students have learned, this type of assignment seems to be the meaningful evaluation task to tackle.

In concluding, it is obvious that good pre-sessional courses and in-sessional support and, especially, good collaborative relationships between teachers and students greatly help overseas students to have successful academic lives, contribute to classes, organize ideas, express themselves and write successful essays in the academic context. In anglophone higher education, especially through writing academic essays, international students could come to develop sophisticated ideas and increasingly experience successful, enjoyable and fruitful academic lives – experiences that might become one of the most beautiful treasures in their lives.

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