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Influences on the development of tertiary academic writing in international students: teaching to the unknown

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Context

- **Small study carried out in an Australian university which is a relative ‘newcomer’ to the international student scene. Entry is IELTS 6 for UG and 6.5 for PG.**
- **The study sought to test the hypothesis that there is a mismatch between these students’ prior academic literacies practices and what is required of them on arrival in Australian university degree programs**

The Study

1. Small case study

- Focus: 12 IS from ISC (Nepal, India, Bangladesh) in Business degree programs – 7x UG x 5 PG

2. Data collection

- Short survey and in-depth interviews/focus groups (to gather student experiences)
- Subject outlines (to assess AL requirements)

3. Analysis

- Constant comparison coding and textual analysis

4. Main focus:

- Assessment literacies and writing

Theoretical Framing

- **Academic literacies frame influenced by Bourdieu's notions of field, habitus and capital (Wingate, 2012; Thomas, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984) sympathetic to our concerns to investigate students' prior experiences of learning plus their home familial/ educational contexts**

Method

We triangulated

- **Interviews/focus groups (student prior educational experiences)**
- **Survey data (student home country familial and schooling demographics)**
- **Document analysis (Australian degree assessment tasks)**

Findings

- 1. Assessment**
- 2. Academic writing**
- 3. Academic reading**

Findings: Assessment – Home Country

Dominant mode of assessment / AL = rote learning and accurate reproduction

Assessment experiences (Writing)	Prevalence out of 12
Summative: Exam as only measure of learning	10
Formative: some had experience of ad hoc testing in class	10
No continuous assessment	10
No take home writing assessment tasks	10

Findings: Assessment – Comparing home country and Australia

- ***“Here we don’t know what to do in our assignments” (PG)***
- ***“Here, when I find things on the internet, I can’t match with assignment questions” (UG)***
- ***“I thought my English was satisfactory but now I know not enough [to do assignment tasks] (UG)***

Findings: Writing in home country

- **Limited experiences of extended writing**
“assignments were to learn from the chapter”
- **Predominately descriptive “you can’t make own ideas”**
- **Limited sources of information, therefore less opportunities for learning to synthesis and integrate references “expected to write straight from book”**
- **No research, paraphrasing, in text citation or referencing “no research, no referencing”**
- ***“Nothing about plagiarism – never heard of it”***

Findings: Reading and information literacy in home country

- **Purpose of reading was to read and memorise the information in preparation for testing**
- **Comparatively little reading. Reading from the textbook and handouts in class**
- **Where additional sources were required *“cut and paste google was norm with the list of links at the end of document”* (PG)**
- **Reading matter prescribed *“no internet ever”* (UG)**
- **Immediate access to teacher explanation in the first language**

Influences beyond the classroom

- 1. IS as workers, housekeepers AND students**
“...we did not have to work, no part-time job, I never cooked. The student’s job was to study.”
- 2. Pace of life**
“Here, no time. Everyone’s running not walking”
- 3. Familial and cultural life** ***“Never was alone”***
“Family supported me”

Student strengths

- **Familial high regard for education**
- **Experience in examination genres**
- **Expertise in memorising and recall**
- **Strong community of practice/culture of helping peers**
- **Persistence and resilience**

Sample Unit XXX Assessment schedule: Undergraduate/ First semester

Assessment	Word Count	Week Due	Percentage
Field Visit Report	750-1000	Week 5	10%
Research Essay	2,500	Week 8	20%
Case Study	2,000	Week 12	20%
Exam	TBA	Week 14	50%

Specified AL requirements for first year success

- **Knowledge of a wide range of assessment genres**
- **Ability to find and integrate 6-15 scholarly references**
- **Use of appropriate disciplinary academic language**
- **‘Original’ ideas – no plagiarism**
- **Authoritative voice or stance and argumentation and evidence**
- **Use of correct presentation and citation style**

Complications for second language writing

Most students in this study have had;

- **Limited opportunities to practise extended writing in English**
- **Little experience with assessment genres (and as social/disciplinary practices rather than skills)**
- **Limited knowledge of the set of linguistic capabilities or moves required to paraphrase or to make and support claims or develop authorial voice**

Limitations

- **Small sample**
- **Findings cannot be generalised to other settings or student cohorts**

Conclusion

- **Class may impact on academic success of IS cohort in ways similar to other Australian studies that have focused on low SES students**
- **Attributes and habits that were part of a student's prior success may not be valued in the same way by institutions**

“ I had glorious results [at home]” (UG failed 6/8 subjects in first year)

We argue:

The first move must be made by institutions:

- **to identify students' prior educational experiences and the AL strengths/capabilities they bring**
- **implement teaching and learning practices that recognise, respond and build on the prior experiences of the students that they admit.**

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