Guessing Game: international students’ accounts of responding to the requirements of essay writing in the UK postgraduate programmes

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Outline

1. Background
2. Aim
3. Research Field
4. Research questions
5. Research design
6. Data: Writing Classes
7. Data: Student Interviews
8. Discussion
Academic Writing in UK higher education

• Writing constitutes a major form of academic assessment in UK higher education

• In Social Sciences key genre is often ‘an essay’

‘the view prevails that [academic] conventions are unproblematic and simply ‘common sense’ ‘ (Lillis 1999: 127)

‘The ‘essay’ is in fact a very complex package of established ways of argumentation, culturally sanctioned principles of content selection, subject or discipline-informed ways of using language, text format and prose. … [This] complexity is not immediately obvious to students’ (Leung 2008: 154).
Example of university guidelines for assessment criteria of students’ essays

Essay
- Displays evidence of **extensive and detailed research**
- Displays clear evidence of **independence of thought and originality**
- There is strong evidence of **critical and analytical thinking**, an ability to contextualize, grasp concepts and their interrelationship, and to relate theory to practice
- Shows evidence of breadth and depth of knowledge
- Contains appropriate **references**, quotations, and bibliography to illustrate points and reinforce arguments
- Work is **clearly written, well-organized**, and with good grammar, spelling and punctuation
L1 & L2 student academic essays

• Different organizational preferences
• Different approaches to argument (e.g. justification, persuasive appeals)
• Different ways of incorporating material (e.g. use of quotes)
• Different ways and extent of getting readers’ attention
• Different ways of orienting the readers to topic
• Different estimates of reader knowledge
• Differences in objectivity (L2 texts may contain more generalisations)
• Differences in how overt linguistic features are used (e.g. subordination)
• Differences in complexity of style

(Hyland 2003: 46)
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Support for International Students</th>
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<td><strong>Programmes/courses</strong></td>
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<td>Before undertaking degree studies</td>
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Aim

To explore the situation of international students and recognize what assists student learning of academic writing and where the learning actually takes place.
# Models of student writing in higher education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Literacies</th>
<th>Academic Socialization</th>
<th>Study skills</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Social practice</td>
<td>• acculturation into disciplinary and subject based discourses and genres</td>
<td>• Individual and cognitive skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Epistemology / identities</td>
<td>• Students acquire the ways of taking, writing, thinking and using literacy that typified members of a disciplinary or subject area community.</td>
<td>• Surface features of language form</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Discourse / power / authorities</td>
<td>• Genres stable, once learned and understood can be reproduced unproblematically.</td>
<td>• Students can transfer their knowledge unproblematically from one context to another</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Communicative practices: genres / disciplines</td>
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<td>(Lea &amp; Street 1998)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Linguistic practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Social meaning / identities</td>
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Programme Aims
The programme is designed to provide a structured pathway into postgraduate programmes related to the fields of Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Law for international students of high potential.

The full-time three term programme aims to:

1. support you in gaining entry to some of the best postgraduate degree programmes in Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, including management related degrees and Law
2. improve your understanding of and ability to use academic English appropriately and effectively at postgraduate level
3. provide you with a range of study, English and communication skills to help you succeed in your postgraduate study in the UK
4. introduce you to the British educational system and the traditional lecture/seminar/tutorial format
5. provide you with a specially designed course related to the academic field in which you intend to specialise.
Research Questions

1. How does writing support on the International Pre-Master’s Programme help international students to answer academic writing requirements?

2. What do these students do in order to meet these requirements?
Data

Collection period: 1 academic year

Writing classes: 12 sessions

4 writing tutors
3 subject tutors
12 students

Course documents
Students’ essays
Writing Classes

- Generic support
- Mix of students from a variety of disciplines
- Taught by EFL/EAP tutors

What is going on?
  - How does writing support on the IPMP support students?

Analysis:
- Microethographic approach to the analysis of classroom literacy events (Bloome et al 2004)
  - Phases
  - Teaching exchanges
  - Interactional patterns
    - Procedural & Principled knowledge (Spillane 2000)
  - Elements of DA
Writing Classes: CTS essays

- 2 sessions with Tom
- Culture, Theory and Society (CTS) essays
- Session 1: early in term 2
- Session 2: early in term 3
Session 1: Culture Theory and Society Essays

Extract 1 - IRF Sequence Analysis

Exchange 1
Tutor Initiation 1 Tom: So back to the questions. Who likes number 1?
Student Response 2 S1: Not me
Tutor Follow-up 3 Tom: Not me, right? Ok, it's a humble question.

Exchange 2
Tutor Initiation 4 ‘Which of the two paradigms (competitive and dominance) more accurately expresses the nature of journalism in this country?’ Were you in this lecture?
Student Response 5 S2: Last term
Tutor Follow-up withheld

Exchange 3
Tutor Initiation 7 Tom: Last term?
Student Response 8 SS: Yea
Tutor Follow-up withheld

Exchange 4
Tutor Initiation 9 Tom: What’s the answer?
Student Response 10 S2: Answer? There is no correct answer.
Tutor Follow-up 11 Tom: Eeeeh. No correct answer? I think you should apply that to most of these questions there is no correct answer. Which is why you need to show your position.

Exchange 5
Tutor Initiation 13 Now, I don’t really understand what these two paradigms are. I wasn’t in the lecture.
  Most of you new students this term weren’t in the lecture. Do you understand competitive and dominance paradigms?
Student Response 16 S2: Yea, they are different. I think the competitive paradigm uhym freedom of the press or freedom of the speech, and there is a talking conve (.) nience, convenience
Continuity marker 18 Tom: Yea
  S2: Talk about the, you know, the like plu (.) pluralism xxx contra xxx
Ellipsed declarative/continuity marker 20 Tom: I’ve heard of , yea
  S2: Control of the newspaper at least >>
Tutor Follow-up 22 Tom: << Ok, I kind of, I kind of understand a little bit better. Thank you. That’s great.

Exchange 6
Tutor Initiation 24 But in fact, I could probably make a structure for this question even though I don’t actually understand it. (. 42’’
Intro
define competitive
define dominance
competitive = journalism ? Yes
comp = journalism ? No
dominance = journalism ? Yes
dom = journalism ? No

Conclusion = comp 60%
don 40%

Figure 1 White board snapshot 1: Tom’s writing on the board
Extract 2 - IRF Sequence Analysis

Exchange 1

Tutor Initiation

1  [Tutor is writing on the board for 42 seconds]

Students Response

2  Tom: You get the idea? (.8'')

Tutor Follow-up

3  [Students nod their heads. Tutor continues to write on the board.]

4  Tom: Three, four, six, eight paragraphs xxx Yes, good idea. (Tom talking to himself)

5  (.) So if I was gonna approach that. I don’t understand what it means but I’ll do

6  some research. I will find the reading list and work out what all these terms mean but in

7  your essay you probably need to give the definition of what this competitive paradigm

Comprehension check

8  means. Right?

Confirmation

9  S4: Yes

10  Tom: I guess you have your introduction. What’s you gonna do in your essay.

11  First stage what is competitive paradigm. Paragraph one two three.

12  What is the dominance paradigm? Now the reader knows what it is.

13  Now, the question is which one of these two paradigms expresses the nature of

14  journalism. So, perhaps the competitive paradigm isn’t about journalism and there must

15  be some reasons why that’s correct however competitive paradigm maybe does not

16  equal journalism exactly or maybe it’s not the best way to do it, okay?

17  Same for the dominance paradigm, the conclusion, which one is the better one? Right?

18  Obviously there is no right answer but you still could choose from your analysis to

19  show that your answer is the competitive paradigm maybe 60%, and the dominance

20  paradigm maybe 40%. Obviously do not write the percentage numbers in your

Comprehension check

21  conclusions. Yes?

Confirmation

22  S4: Yes

23  Tom: Cool!

Exchange 2

Tutor Initiation

24  yhm, so what I would like you to do now is that kind of. (.)

25  Okay, you get an idea what structuring is?

Students Response

26  S4: [turning her head horizontally to the left and to the right meaning 'no']

Tutor Follow-up withheld

Exchange 3

Tutor Initiation

27  Tom: How dare you? (in a cheerful tone of his voice)

Students Response

28  S4: (laughing) just joking, joking

Tutor Follow-up

29  Tom: Of course you can!
**Session 2: Essay Structure**

*Extract 3 - IRF Sequence Analysis*

**Exchange 1**

**Tutor Initiation**

1. **Tom:** I think it’s a question, and there’s no right answer for this, right. And to most of those questions there is no right answer for this. So, to a certain extend ((uhm)) you gonna be judged on just, you know, using appropriate ideas, organising it well, nice paragraphing etc. etc. So to a certain extend I might not worry perhaps as deeply as you are worrying about getting it right ((laugh)) and worry a bit more about showing you’ve read the nice books and…

**Student Response**

2. **S1:** Right, I don’t try to find the right answer. I just try to find how can I organise my essay, I mean.

**Tutor Follow-up**

3. **Tom:** Sure, sure. ((uhm)) So if you divide the theories of Enlightenment into secularism, human rights and something else that might be one way to organise your essay. You might look at it from the point of view of Western countries and non-Western countries, that is a different way to organise your essay. Something like that that just breaks it into easy pieces and you tell your reader: I’ll do this and this and this. It might not lead to the perfect answer but it’s a clearly understandable structure. …That’s my point.

**Exchange 2**

**Tutor Initiation**

4. **Tom:** Did that help?

**Student Response**

5. **S1:** Yea.

**Tutor Follow-up**

6. **Tom:** I’ve answered the Enlightenment question!
Writing class: what is going on?

• Predominant orientation towards procedural knowledge and study skills approach to academic writing
• Tutor provides a template for students to work from
• Students’ participatory roles:
  – Active: source of content knowledge
  – Passive: recipients
• Content knowledge: unclear status in the process of writing
• Tutor – a genre/writing specialist – distances himself from the content knowledge
Interviews with Students

• Mix of students from a variety of disciplines
• Mix of nationalities
• Mix of prior educational & professional backgrounds
• Self-selected volunteers interested in writing and research

• What is going on?
  – What do these students do in order to meet these requirements?

• Analysis
  – Content analysis
  – Descriptive coding
Writing classes are ‘good for me’

Maria Teresa

“Peter [writing tutor] told me everything. All I know is because of Peter. (...) It’s like that you have to have a beginning, a middle and an end, but in the beginning, in the middle and the end, actually you say the same things. Like in the beginning you introduce your idea and what you’re going to say and what’s your position and where you’re going to get, and then the devises (...) like giving examples (...) to like make it stronger your point like. (...)And then put something like, “In conclusion...” (...) And in the conclusion you state what your essay’s about, you know, yeah, you just state it all over again and again and again; (...)That’s it!”
‘Worried about’ writing an essay

Genji

“I worried about it [an essay for the optional module] because I think Law essay is different from CTS, the critique and other essays. (...) it’s hard for me to get information from Peter’s class [academic writing class] and our [subject] teacher, I think he didn’t give us information about how to write essays too. So for this one I really … I am not sure if it’s a good one.”
Subject tutors – ‘they cannot help us’

Yang

“They [subject lecturers] taught us about the lecture but not about writing. So I don’t think I got some support from them.”

“She [Business lecturer] just mention that maybe if we ask her individually she could answer us but I didn’t try. It was just that I did by myself, just did it myself.”

Maria Teresa

“They [subject tutors] avoid to give you an answer.”
Reading: structure and language of the disciplines

Lee

“Firstly, get the topic, secondly think about it, thirdly find the books, articles and some information on the website or from the library and then, based according to the information I have got, I will think about the topic again and organise the information, and divide the information into different aspects. (...) Because if I have different aspects, that means I have a structure it’s easy for me to write down the idea.”

Ana

“First of all I think, next I read. By the reading I underline what I write. Next I collect in one place. Next I read what I have in general and my opinions also, ... it’s like to build a house or something like this. It is my strategy.”
“Actually what is really important that… yeah, when you have somebody like your friends who know something about the topic then you can discuss it. And that’s why in my opinion I got A for my critique because there was a girl, Greek and a Turkish girl, and they disagreed in many things ((laughter)) because she doesn’t like the European Union but I am more favouring the European Union. And then I discovered new ideas through her, so that’s really important.”
Student Interviews: What is going on?

• Study skills are viewed as a much needed support

• Inability to transfer the skills from generic writing classes to disciplinary writing

• Sense of isolation with regard to writing for the subject modules

Non-formal learning
→ Reading
→ Mind-mapping
→ Talking to friends
→ Networking

→ Looking for examples of texts/papers
→ Paying attention to language while reading literature
Discussion

1. Review the *practice* of the teaching writing.
2. Redefine *students participatory roles* in the process of learning writing.
3. Revise the *space* of teaching writing at the university.

‘The acquisition of academic literacy may be akin to a game ..., it is a game with a bewildering set of rules, many of which are never made explicit to student writer’.

(Harwood & Hadley 2004: 356)
“A student came to me [writing tutor] with their CTS essay [a compulsory subject essay] and said that Stephen [CTS subject lecturer] said, “Put your conclusion in the introduction, which I did, and then Chuck [CTS seminar tutor] marked it as ‘you shouldn’t do that, you’ve come to the conclusion too quickly.’” And there was a kind of mismatch between... and that’s the kind of thing we would tell them in the writing class to do. So, they’re getting this message, “Do it, do it, do it.” They do it, they’ll hand it in, and then the feedback comes back, “No, you shouldn’t have done that,” so there are these kind of inconsistencies. It’s a problem, it’s frustrating maybe for teachers and students. But, I always do tell the students that that’s kind of real university to an extent.”
References


