12
The Teaching of the Academic Essay: Is a Genre Approach Possible?

Tony Dudley-Evans
University of Birmingham
United Kingdom

The increased prominence of genre-based approaches to the teaching of academic or professional writing has been a feature of English for Specific Purposes courses in the last ten years. The influential research of Swales (1981; 1990) on the introduction to the academic article and that of Bhatia (1993) on promotional genres have been translated into teaching materials (for example, Swales & Feak, 1994; Weissberg & Baker, 1990), that provide valuable insights for students into the ways of structuring research reports and articles. There are no doubt numerous other sets of in-house materials that also make use of this research. The academic article, in particular, has a regularity in its discourse structure that lends itself to an analysis that makes use of "moves" that typically occur in a more or less fixed order. Although there have been concerns about the dangers of an overprescriptive approach to the academic writing resulting from a genre approach (Paltridge, 1996; Prior, 1995) and about the absence of research into other faculty genres such as the master’s or doctoral dissertation (Dudley-Evans, 1997), there is little doubt that the existing research into genre has enriched and broadened the teaching of academic writing. Similarly, the awareness that much nonliterary writing involves the mixing of genres, and the need to manipulate the generic conventions (Bhatia, 1997a), has led to increased sophistication in the teaching of professional writing.

THE ESSAY

In this chapter, however, I wish to discuss the problems and challenges of developing a genre approach to the teaching of a typical classroom genre (Johns, 1997) that does not lend itself to a move analysis along the lines of the work on the
academic article and promotional genres referred to earlier. This is the essay or, as it is more precisely called in the university in which I teach (the University of Birmingham, England), "The 2000- or 3000-Word Assignment." The experiences that I wish to draw upon come from teaching international students on various master's courses related to business, finance, banking, and accountancy at the University of Birmingham. The particular courses that I refer to are the MBA in International Banking and Finance and two master's courses, one in Accounting and Finance, the other in Money, Banking, and Finance. These are all one-year courses that follow a heavy lecture program from late September through to May, at which time the examinations take place. In the final part of the course, the students carry out a small-scale research project over the summer period, which is written up in a 10,000- to 15,000-word dissertation.

During the year, students have to write between ten and 12 assignments (the number varies according to which course they follow and which options they take within the course). The length of these assignments is usually between 2,000 and 3,000 words.

The courses themselves are very much designed for international students and are followed by very few home students. They are postexperience courses designed for young professionals with some experience in the areas of business, accounting, banking, portfolio management in investment, and so on, and aim to provide a mix of practical training in these areas supported by an introduction to the relevant literature in the field. The aims of the course thus differ significantly from those of other master's courses in humanities, science, and engineering, which are more academically oriented. The business, accountancy, and finance courses are very much geared toward the needs of the international students and are seemingly quite successful in blending elements of training with more traditional academic requirements. To give an example, assignments may ask students to adopt the position of an investment counselor advising a client on the desirability of investing in different markets, thus reflecting closely the type of professional activity that they might engage in once they have obtained the master's qualifications. They will, however, be expected to justify their recommendations in the assignment by reference to appropriate sources, thus satisfying the academic side of the course. In fact, the courses, in my experience, face similar challenges to master's courses in TELF/TESL that I run in my own department where there is a constant and stimulating need to balance aspects of theory and practice in training teachers.

The students thus have to write in three main academic or classroom genres throughout the course: the assignment (or essay), the examination answer, and the dissertation. Of these, the assignment is the most difficult to prepare students for. The dissertation follows something like the traditional IMRAD format (introduction, method, results, and discussion) and lends itself to an approach that introduces students—flexibly!—to the various moves that they will need to use in the different sections of the dissertation. Students are prepared for examination questions through team-taught sessions in which subject and language teachers work together to demystify the meaning of questions and to develop appropriate strategies for answers. Assignments are much trickier for a variety of reasons. First, they vary quite considerably in what they expect students to do. Some are basically reviews of the literature, others present case studies, and others mirror professional documents presenting advice for clients. They thus also vary in the amount of "knowledge-telling" or "knowledge-transformation" expected (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987); the reviews of the literature will mostly involve knowledge-telling, but the edge-telling and knowledge-transformation in that they draw on the relevant in the subject area and to simulate documents providing recommendations for partly because they do not usually have a number of delineated sections in the way that articles or dissertation will normally have, and even where there is a delineated section, such as the introduction or conclusion, there does not seem to be a predictable structure for these sections in the same way there is in the academic essay, and thus the move approach that seems so relevant to the writing of articles, theses, and reports is of limited value.

RESEARCH INTO ESSAYS

Research into the discourse structure of assignments, or essays as they will generally be called, is limited. Jordan (1997, p. 7) reported on the various study skills required in essay writing, listing the following skills:

1. planning, writing drafts, revising;
2. summarising, paraphrasing and synthesising;
3. continuous writing in an academic style organized appropriately;
4. using quotations, footnotes, bibliography;
5. finding and analysing evidence, using data appropriately.

These are clearly important skills and are likely to be taught as part of a process approach to the teaching of writing. But, as Jordan noted, they relate to all the genres that students have to write and certainly do not help distinguish what is particular to the essay.

Jordan (1997, p. 9) also listed a number of specific academic concepts/functions: describe, define, exemplify, classify, assume, hypothesize, compare, express, caution, and so on. The teaching of these functions is the basis of many English for Academic Purposes textbooks, but again does not help sort out what is directly involved in writing an essay as opposed to other classroom genres.

The one attempt to devise a set of moves that I am familiar with is that of Hyland (1990, p. 69), who suggested that the argumentative essay has three stages: thesis,
argument, and conclusion. Within each stage there are a number of moves, as shown in Table 12.1. Many of the moves are optional, and these are indicated in parentheses.

**TABLE 12.1**

**Genre of the Argumentative Essay**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Move</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>(Gambit) controversial or dramatic statement (Information) background material (Proposition) states writer's position and delimits topic (Evaluation) brief support of proposition (Marker) introduces and/or identifies a list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>(Marker) signals the claim and relates it to the text (Restatement) rephrasing or repetition of proposition (Claim) reason for acceptance of the proposition. Either a. strength of perceived shared assumptions; b. generalization based on evidence; or c. force of conviction (Support) grounds that underpin the claim: either a. assumptions used to make the claim; or b. data or references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>(Marker) signals conclusion boundary (Consolidation) relates argument to the proposition (Affirmation) restates proposition (Close) widens context or perspective of proposition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This set of moves is useful; it is quite revealing about the development of an argument in an essay, but the number of optional moves is problematic. One solution to this might be to think of elements not as *moves* as in the Swales and Bhatia models, but as what Young (1994), in analyzing university lectures, describes as *phases*. Phases are "strands of discourse that recur discontinuously throughout a particular domain and are interspersed with others resulting in an interweaving of threads as the discourse progresses" (p. 165).

But the main problem, at least in the use of the model, is that it fails to account for the fact that there is considerable variation among the essays required by different disciplines, or even within one discipline among different subject lecturers. As Horowitz (1986a, p. 447) stated, in essays there is "a specific range of acceptable writing behaviours dictated not by the individual but by the academic community." Similarly, Kusel (1992, cited in Jordan, 1997, p. 237) concluded from a study of the structure of essay introductions and conclusions from six different subject areas that the discourse of these sections varies considerably across disciplines. However, potentially useful it may be, Hyland's model is essentially rather limited and seems based more on intuition about what an essay should include than on detailed analysis of a suitable corpus of essays.

Another approach to the analysis of the essay is that of O'Brien (1995), who noted that the Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) presented by Mann and Thompson (1986; 1988) provided a useful means of understanding why "weak" texts are incoherent. RST analysis involves the establishment of linkages between different spans of text, which might involve relations such as Claim and Evidence, or Cause and Result. O'Brien shows that lack of coherence in a section can be explicitly highlighted by indicating the absence of linkages between different sections of the text. By analogy, the RST approach can also be used to help writers strengthen the coherence of their text by increasing the number of specific links. Although this research is clearly relevant and deals with a key aspect of academic writing, its weakness is that it does not address the more general problem of presenting and developing in the essay an argument supported by evidence and citation in the style expected by the subject department.

**THE WRITING COURSE**

The failure to identify any text analysis immediately and directly applicable to the teaching of writing essays has led to various conclusions. The main one is that the writing course should concentrate on introducing students to the academic stance expected of a postgraduate student in these departments, notably the "rhetoric of objectivity," or the "rhetoric of no rhetoric." The two constituents of the course are (a) a focus on certain relevant features of the essay, notably the use of an appropriate style in writing, the presentation and discussion of data, the use of hedging devices in the making of claims, the use of sources and (b) one-to-one tutorials in which students are helped to structure the essays coherently and to adopt the appropriate stance expected by the department.

It might be thought that a more extensive team-taught program along the lines of similar programs run with other departments at Birmingham (Jones & Dudley-Evans 1980).
regard to the assignments that they set. This indeed would be extremely desirable, but the nature of the staff in the Business School is such that it has not been possible to set up more than a limited number of team-taught classes on examination questions in the period leading up to the examinations at the end of the first and second terms. There are two reasons for this. First, many of the courses are options, and students select their own program from a large number of options available. This means that it is impractical to concentrate on a particular essay as many in the group will not, in fact, be writing that essay. Second, many of the courses are taught by visiting lecturers, and it is therefore difficult to ask them to participate in further classes related to English and study skills. The team-taught sessions that are run concentrate on general examination skills and strategies for answers.

The part of the English course that focuses on linguistic features of the essay concentrates on introducing aspects of English style, particularly the choice of lexis and grammatical features that are more formal and "academic" in style. Many international students are unaware of the differences between informal spoken English and the more formal style expected in an essay, and this lack of awareness may have been increased by the otherwise desirable concentration in general English courses on spoken language and on a communicative approach to the teaching of that language. The course emphasizes features such as the following:

1. the preference for more formal verbs such as *investigate* rather than *look into*, *fluctuate* rather than *go up and down*, *obtain* rather than *get*, and so on;

2. the need to avoid colloquial expressions such as *sort of negative, the future is up in the air, pretty good*;

3. the need to avoid contracted forms such as *isn't, can't*, and so on;

4. the preference for nominalized forms, for example, *the cooperation of IBM and Apple led to the establishment of a new factory* rather than *IBM and Apple have been cooperating, and this has led to the setting up of a new factory*;

5. the avoidance of "run on" expressions such as *etc., and so forth*;

6. the careful and selective use of the personal forms *I, we, and you* and the avoidance of *one*; and

7. the avoidance of direct questions and the preference for indirect questions.

These issues are taught through short exercises comparing informal and formal language, and activities in which students are asked to revise passages written in an inappropriate style.

The focus on these aspects of language serves two purposes: It helps students to remove the kind of basic stylistic errors that make their writing appear "foreign" and that may take the attention away from the content of the essay. It also helps to introduce students to the stance as an academic writer expected of them by the departments. This effort is taken a stage further in the subsequent units, which deal with the need for caution in academic writing and the need for the use of hedging devices, particularly when making claims based on data collected. Students are taught to present data appropriately and to use modal verbs, appropriate reporting verbs such as *indicate* and *suggest*, and other hedging devices such as the use of vague expressions like *a significant amount, slightly higher* (Channel, 1994; Hyland, 1996) in making generalizations from the data.

These two units on linguistic features and hedging work well and are popular with students, particularly as they deal with the actual problems that they seem to face in the first part of the one-year course when they are having to write these other assignments for the first time. There is, however, one main danger with the approach. Because of the lack of extensive contact between EAP and the departmental staff (faculty) mentioned earlier, the materials are general in nature and do not relate directly to particular assignments. This can be compensated for to some extent in the one-to-one tutorials where students are helped with the actual structure of the essay that they are writing, particularly the introduction and the conclusion. But only certain students with particular problems will have the opportunity of having a tutorial, and there is the consequent danger that the strategies taught in the writing class will not, in fact, be transferred to the writing of the actual assignments required by the departments.

**USE OF SOURCES**

As a result of these misgivings about the pedagogical materials, a major effort has been made to ensure that the final part of the writing course, the use of sources and quotation or citation, reflects the actual practice in the departments and the expectations of the lecturers marking assignments.

There is a considerable amount of confusion about the rights and wrongs of using sources, on the part of both students and lecturers in these courses. The concept of plagiarism indeed has been much discussed in the literature in recent years with interesting contributions by Pennycook (1996), Scollon (1995), and Widdowson (1993), among many others. Many of these contributions suggest that the definition of plagiarism is very difficult to pin down and will vary from culture to culture. Pennycook (1996) argued that the extensive quotation of others' actual words without attribution of the source is acceptable behavior in Chinese society, and Widdowson (1992) seemed to suggest that we all plagiarize one another all the time. While accepting that plagiarism is a difficult concept to define and that we academics do steal one another's ideas, I feel that too much philosophizing can confuse the issues. It is far better to...
aware of or quickly understand the issues of plagiarism, provided that they are discussed fully in class time. They know that to copy extensively and widely from essays written by the previous year’s students or from the Internet is dishonest, and that to quote directly from a source without attribution is wrong. They also know (or quickly understand) that in most cases they will need to convert the original words from a source into their own words and that the key criterion of successful and correct citation is whether they have shown understanding of the source. It is my experience that once the basic purpose of making use of sources is understood, it is the techniques of quotation and citation that really cause the problems. Students are worried by questions such as how many quotations can be used in an essay, how far the original text needs to be changed, and how one actually shows understanding of the text.

In this regard I have found the emphasis on the “sin” of plagiarism that is frequently placed in university regulations and departmental handouts unhelpful. In one of the departments whose students I teach, a handout on plagiarism is distributed at the beginning of the academic year. The following quotes are extracts from this handout:

Plagiarism is considered by the University as a serious offence. It is a form of cheating and as such is penalised by the examiners according to its extent and gravity.

Plagiarism is a form of cheating in which the student tries to pass off someone else’s work as his or her own. When it occurs it is usually found in dissertations, theses or assessed essays. Typically substantial passages are “lifted” verbatim from a particular source without proper attribution having been made.

Do not copy from other students. Staff can easily detect copying.

It is difficult to disagree with anything in these quotes, but the tone and emphasis of the document seem less than helpful. Clearly, copying from other students or the Internet is cheating and deserves punishment if discovered. But is a failure to attribute sources so sinful? In many cases it will result from a lack of knowledge about the techniques of attribution and unwillingness to alter the original rather than from a preparedness to take risks through cheating.

It is my experience that most students are uncertain about how far to go in changing the original text of a source. In the “knowledge-telling” part of assignments where the focus is on, for example, an accountancy technique or an investment procedure, it is actually difficult to change the original wording that much. The key thing is to include a reference and to show that one has understood the source. Swales and Feak (1994, p. 126) get down to the real nub of the matter when they ask in the exercise quoted next to draw the line between what is acceptable and what is not:

1. copying a paragraph as it is from the source without any acknowledgment;
what is accepted by subject lecturers marking the assignments. There is evidence that lecturers supervising dissertations or marking assignments for international students in applied linguistics often do not, in fact, pick up cases where the student has taken *verbatim* quite long chunks from the original text, and certainly option 4 in the exercise from Swales and Feak quoted earlier is regarded as acceptable. Whether this is a result of the widespread use of continuous assessment and the consequent increase in the amount of marking that has to be done, or an acceptance of the difficulty of changing the behavior of international students remains a question that is difficult to answer. It is certainly a case, I would argue, where we as EAP teachers need to be aware of and act upon what Graves (1975) referred to as the "informal order" or practical system of what is actually accepted by subject lecturers as compared with the "formal order," which is set down in the institution's regulations. Graves' example of the informal order comes from the Third World, but the same phenomenon can be observed, I would suggest, in First World universities.

Wilson (1997) has indeed suggested that the limited use of copying from sources may be a useful stage on the way to developing the appropriate academic style for the use of references to support an argument. Drawing on work by Chanock (1996) and Whitaker (1993), she suggested that when students are learning to write classroom genres, they develop "interdiscourse," which is formed from their hypotheses about what is required in a new classroom genre. She also suggested that there are four stages in the development of academic writing. These are: *repetition*, which involves extensive copying without citation; *patching*, which also involves extensive copying but with the appropriate citations; *plagiphrasing*, in which students blend copied sections, quotations, paraphrases, and their own words; and, finally, *conventional academic writing*. She suggested that the third stage, plagiphrasing, shows that students are beginning to speak with their own voices, and is an important stage on the way to developing the appropriate academic writing style.

**DISCUSSION**

The course described differs from many genre-based courses in its focus on the appropriate academic stance for a master's course and the appropriate strategy for the use of sources. Many EAP writing courses (for example, Weissberg & Buker, 1990) assume that non-native speaking writers are essentially familiar with the conventions of the genres that they have to write, but need help with translating that familiarity with the conventions into appropriate language. This is by now a very familiar move-based type of course based on Swales' research into the academic article and other similar work. The course described here assumes that learners have had relatively little experience with the writing required of them at the University of Birmingham and need help with adjusting to the appropriate stance, that is, the mixing of academic and professional writing expected of them in what are postexperience and essentially practical courses. In its focus on stance and strategy, the course has certain similarities with the approach adopted in Swales and Feak's *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (1994); the difference is that it is concerned not with the reporting of research findings but with the process of showing that the writer has understood and can summarize the relevant sources. The course also deals with a major academic area that causes difficulty for international students at the University of Birmingham: the appropriate use and citation of sources.

I believe this description of the writing course for master's students has a number of implications for genre teaching. It is now widely accepted that text analysis attempting only to establish a set of moves for a given genre or part-genre (a particular section of the academic article, say) is insufficient. The move analysis needs to be supplemented by analysis of sociological features of the context within which the text is used and of the discourse community that will read and judge the text.

In the same way, the teaching of moves as part of an academic writing course for graduate students needs to be supplemented by consideration of the appropriate academic stance expected by the department. As Swales and Feak (1994, p. 3) stated in the introduction to their textbook, it is important to stress the concept of "positioning." This involves asking students to assess what they are writing in terms of how well it is positioning them as junior members of their chosen academic "communities." The stances that the students taking the courses at the University of Birmingham described here have to adopt are rather diverse, but the basic point made by Swales and Feak holds true. There is a particular danger in any kind of genre teaching: The writing teacher may find the teaching of a set of generalized moves a straightforward and popular method that may lead to a certain comfortable isolation from the actual discipline. The risk is that such an approach will not confront many of the day-to-day problems students encounter when writing the actual genres required by the department. As always in English for Specific Purposes work, there is a need to find out what the actual problems are and come up with innovative solutions rather than settle unquestioningly for accepted procedures.

The genre of the assessed essay or the 2,000- or 3,000-word assignment is much less predictable than the research report and dissertation. The teaching of issues related to stance or positioning is, I have argued, much more feasible and more relevant than an attempt to establish and teach a pattern of moves. It is thus essential for the writing teacher to find out as much as possible about the expectations of the department through dialogue and the examination of actual texts that students write and subject lecturers' reactions to them. Such an approach—especially where it attempts to find out how one or more aspects of academic writing (for example, using sources) is regarded by subject lecturers—is as much a genre approach to the teaching of writing as a course focusing on the moves in the introduction or discussion sections of a research article.