

Students' Argument Writing Failure in English: Blame it on Socio-culture System

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ABSTRACT The present paper is an outcome of a study in which the researchers evaluated and interpreted students' argument essays within the broader communicative context of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. To arrive at the sphere of influence on second language education, the researchers synthesized linguistics with socio-cultural insights from scholars who view second language learners as social beings. Through a socio-cultural orientation to literacy, lecturers and students are receptors to both formal and informal influences. Hence students' discourses are not viewed solely as texts that share formal surface features, but as a manifestation of collective cognition mediated by the tools and resources that are made available and used in the social milieu. The researchers concluded that University of Venda students' limited capacity in adopting a credible and objective stance in argument writing is attributed to a collectivist background and a lack of discursive interaction that has resulted from an inadequate apprenticeship into academic discourse. As such, the English Department's efforts are being thwarted by an absence of appropriate discourse reinforcement from content disciplines and following on this, is the fact that some academics are ill equipped for the task of providing both linguistic and discipline specific knowledge scaffolding to students.

INTRODUCTION

South African university students' writing in English as a second language (ESL) continues to arouse negative criticism beyond academia to the work place for there has been qualified concern around graduates' ESL literacy levels. The lack of proficiency in English among students in general (Neeta 2010; Chimbganda 2011), has been a long-standing challenge with which academics have been grappling. The significance is that teachers in high schools and some university facilitators also suffer from the same limitations as they are not adequately trained appropriately in using English as a medium of instruction and communication. The facilitators are not sufficiently equipped for the development of academic literacy in their students because they themselves use English incorrectly and this has resulted in mother tongues being preferred in content disciplines and not because of the love for their mother tongues to mask their inadequacies in the language of teaching and learning. This has led to students' English proficiency levels being inadequate for study through the medium of English. Hence the teaching and learning in school and university, is in-

terdicted in miscommunication as the socio-cultural machinery continues to negatively impinge on the outcome of higher education. Thus the recycling of both linguistically and academically limited graduates through the higher education system continues unabated. As academic literacy comprises of a variety of discourses with their own conventions (Gee 1996), students need to be apprenticed into an academic culture for them to be capable of writing essays that show clear argument, analytical reasoning, critique and relevance (Van Schalkwyk 2008: 23; Stotts 2014).

Theoretical Framework

To establish educational and social practices that are brought to bear on students' argument writing practices at the University of Venda, academic writing is not embraced as a discreet, independent and neutral knowledge. It is viewed as a socio-culturally constituted event. That is, discourse in the form of text is socially constituted, deconstructed, and produced and reproduced (Fairclough 2001; Wodak and Meyer 2001; Garing 2014). A key feature of the socio-cultural view of human development as amplified by Vygotsky (1978),

Wertsch (1998) and Gee (2005), is that higher order functions develop out of social interaction. It is through interaction with knowledgeable people that students appropriate the words of others and in so doing, appropriate the organizational patterns (concepts) of the culture of the particular language which includes disciplinary discourse. This is the reason Hyland (2002) argues for looking beyond the traditional applied linguistics view of students' texts as autonomous objects, instead, the texts need to be viewed within the context in which they are written because they are affected by the situation in which the cognitive processing takes place. In describing students' writing in second language therefore, their educational developmental stages, from primary school to university, form an integral part of their achievements.

Gee (2005: 78) astutely argues that communication is linked to the interests and social practices of the people who communicate because there is reflexivity between language and "reality". Language simultaneously reflects reality (that is, the way things are) and constructs (construes) it to be a certain way and the assembling that goes on in discourses, is always relative to individuals' socio-culturally defined experiences in the world. This is because discourse models are shared across people, books, other media and various political practices. Gee (2005: 35) emphasizes the fact that literacy practices are 'almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into and part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values and beliefs'. Hence discourses are not mastered merely through formal instruction only, but through a supportive environment in which there is vibrant interaction with people who have already mastered the discourses. Generally, discourse is viewed as a semantic system in which the underlying principle is interpretation, it follows that the interpretation has to be based on the assigning of meaning to the various textual expressions in it.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Thus social and grammatical structures can be objects of both quantitative and qualitative inquiry as the analyst inevitably gets engaged in the interpretation of second language education that is inseparable from the evaluation of social life. In this sense, quantitative differences

are inseparable from qualitative effects. This means, as discourse analysts of argument writing, the researchers engaged meaning at a general level of correlations between form (structural) and function (meaning) in discourse. Gee (2005) further explains that "a form" in subject position in a declarative sentence is a grammatical structure that expresses the topic (a function) of the sentence, which names the entity about which a claim is being made and in terms of which the claim should be disputed. A conjunction or conjunctive phrase, such as "but" or "on the other hand," which can begin a second sentence or a paragraph is a form that can set up a contrast (a function) in meaning between two topics. Adverbs such as "then," "thus", "therefore" and so on also perform conjunctive roles in language usage even though they represent only the meaning potential of a form or structure. Thus to analyse students' texts and draw an overall competence and performance ability in argument writing, the researchers relied on both textual and interpersonal discourse resources from Gee's (2005) form and function in discourse. The resources included direct personal appeals; contradictions and juxtapositions, modal verbs, amplifiers/emphatics, personal pronouns, connectives, elaborations/explanations, validity markers and attitude markers. The researchers point out that the exploration of discourse resources and functions are by no means exhaustive in this paper. However, students' organization of their texts is achieved through the way they establish the relationship of ideas in their texts. This is the relation that Martin and Rose (2003: 120) refer to as logical relations for they organize discourse units into arguments.

Since interpretational data analysis is among the approaches for analyzing case study data, the researchers adopted the qualitative design methodology because it facilitated firstly, the description of deductions made from the conceptual and theoretical framework and secondly, the description of students' linguistic behaviour in the context of their written texts and the researchers were also able to employ both frequency counts and text analyses of the sample essays. A corpus of forty-five sample essays were collected from students registered in the foundation to honours level in the departments of English and Geography. The Geography essays were taken as representing content disci-

plines, which served to illustrate competence and performance in argument writing ability in a discipline other than English. Since written texts are a window to the socio-cultural nature of influence, students' essays were viewed as functioning in a way that offered a representation of the writers themselves, that is, their socio-cultural orientations. Thus, the essays featured as case study samples for a hands-on document analysis that afforded a window to the socio-cultural argument writing situation (Lea and Street 2013).

The quantitative part of the analysis entailed the establishment of the total number of words per essay followed by the counting of occurrences of each of the textual and interpersonal discourse resources that appeared in the individual essays. The computations were repeated separately for each of the discourse resources for the 45 essays. The total number of discourse constructs and devices per group of essays was established and to ascertain the percentage of usage, a computation was done which translated into medians. For example, the first ten essays had a total of 71 appearances of conjunctive relations against a total of 4177 words for the group. This means the median of usage was $71/4177$, which equals 1.70%. The computations were repeated separately for each of the constructs and devices for the sample groups of essays and the results were tabulated accordingly. In cases where the reported median was 0.00, it meant that 99% of the essays did not have that device or marker.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Generally, students' texts had errors of surface grammar, tense and vocabulary and their structuring of texts was not satisfactory and appropriate for the various levels. Some sample Geography essays were sign-posted through the use of sub-headings inside the texts. We interpreted this as the students' way of guiding the reader through their texts but the sub-headings failed to accomplish this purpose and instead, the style rendered the writing to be disjointed and inappropriate. This could have resulted from the lecture handouts and compendia given to the students which are thrown in randomly in their writing. One sample text from the Geography department states: *Indigenous knowledge system adapted to a wide range of local condition hence provide abundant of food*

supply while on the other side mitigate potential for disease, diseases and pest problems. It makes use of wide range of species and world race which vary in the reaction against pest and disease problem. One point of view from the English department went thus: *overseas education in terms of teaching people in the younger age the way of surviving through innovation and wisdom. That reflects the vital part that overseas education plays which also towards economic viability and as such the hardships of life and escalation of serious global problem (unemployment) will be curbed.* The two sample texts above illustrate that logical progression and proficiency levels in English, in general is way below par. At honours level, they are expected to manifest better consistency in their written texts as they are supposed to have reached the fourth stage in the development of inter language systems. This is the stage that Brown (1993: 212) calls 'the stabilization stage'. In this stage, 'the learner has relatively few errors and has mastered the system to the point that fluency and intended meanings are not problematic'. The sentences in both sample texts are marked by grammatical errors and mistakes which resulted in poor paragraphing and flawed discourse. The students seem to have internalized certain rules that govern the use of the resources of the language, but are only vaguely aware of how to apply them in their written tasks.

When we turn to the specifics of discourse resources use in the students' texts, features such as attitude markers and commentaries did not feature at all. The students' failure to employ commentaries may reflect an assumption that readers share their views, thus obviating the drawing of attention to the collectivist nature of the socio-cultural context. The problem could mean that students are not fully aware of how to employ the devices effectively because they have not been made aware of how to make use of them in writing or it could even be that they do not exist in their culture or both. It is also significant that even the use of proverbs and sayings was none existent. This is surprising considering that sayings and proverbs are quite pervasive in rural traditional societies such as the one represented in this article. It has been argued in the literature that the citations of external sources such as proverbs to enhance one's stand on an issue is considered a valid

enough strategy for second language students because it is another way of buttressing one's argument in the common and old wisdom.

On the other hand, the modal verbs featured quite prominently in the students' essays and the medians were quite noticeable. However, the significance of the occurrences could be due to the functions they perform as they were not appropriately used in the texts. For example: *Doing the higher education in overseas can be better than doing it in South Africa. The person can come back more sophisticated and highly educated as... Overseas countries are well developed and there are lots of facilities that can be used to encourage higher education. ... When you can do higher education in Overseas you will be meeting many different people from different countries who have different cultures, values and beliefs and they will also be using different languages.* Since the meanings of the modals of possibility, necessity, and prediction is not so distinguishable in essay writing especially, the modal verbs can be a challenge to students who are not appropriately initiated into their use. The sample texts have shown that they are not aware of the different functions of the various categories. From the researchers' personal experiences in social interactions and in the lecture hall, modal verbs generally present a challenge to both lecturers and students and this is pervasive in the wider social milieu. There is a widespread misapplication in use for possibility, necessity and prediction.

In order to conform to pedagogic requirement for a balanced argument, and in order for a student's stand to be credible, a student's text needs to be written in a balanced manner through giving both the pros and cons of an issue. Part of the balancing of an argument or discussion can be accomplished through the use of appropriate concessive clauses or conjunctive relations. In the sample texts, students' use of conjunctive relations was mostly limited to sentence-level contradictions with no elaborations. For example, *'First of all the word 'control' itself takes us back to the dark-old-days of apartheid and torture and just because of those days, I don't think that anybody in South Africa deserves that punishment again. Controlling a human being is like punishing a human being and that is bad enough'*. Leki (1995: 262) points out that, students' should set aside one section of their writing for contradictions and juxtapositions to honestly discuss arguments against

their positions. The researchers surmised that this is difficult for a people whose culture is steeped in secrecy of "not revealing oneself" on issues. As such, it could be that students perceive elaboration of the counter-argument to their own as self-defeating, especially when they have to elaborate the counter-side. They feel they might expose themselves in the process of balancing the argument which would not augur well for who they are in accordance with their culture. While the majority of essays somehow anticipated opposing positions, the essays failed to deal with opposing views directly. One of the sample texts began with the statement, *'Yes, in my opinion parents should be able to control the lives of their children aged between 13 and 20 year because they are the custodians of children as they are the people who brought these children to this world.* S/he proceeded to pinpoint the outline of the merits of the one side of the argument and concluded with *'Control forms an important part of parenting. Children must be controlled, even if this means using the cane'*. The student presented one viewpoint which can be interpreted in terms of the collectivity stance in the sense that issues are perceived as given; and as such, the individual does not have to strive for a balanced presentation.

A final aspect that needs to be highlighted here is the fact that the majority of the sample essays were at an elementary and intermediate expository level. This is evidenced by the existence of claims throughout the students' essays which lacked data to support the claims. The students did not attempt to weave in arguments through supporting examples (data) from either individual or friends' life experiences so as to give the texts credibility. With first hand experiences missing, the warrants were also conspicuously absent. This is a telling on the socio-cultural nature of the teaching and learning, that none of the essays cited particular instances that might have been remotely related to their own experiences. Even in the response of one of the mature students who is a parent and has teenage children of his/her own, s/he does not cite actual examples of personal conflict with his/her children. S/he states that, *Having two kids who are now in their teens, I can see that this is the most frustrating period of all the stages to both parents and children. As a parent, you need to be vigilant to make them follow what you think is right for them. If you slacken in your control and guidance, they can quickly*

see it and continue with their wayward dealings. Constant control and guidance could make them walk in the right direction, thus, giving them more confidence. Therefore, the analysis of the data under review suggests that learning/teaching strategies have contributed to students' generating the types of sentences that have been encountered in the sample texts. The sentences in the sample texts seem to have been randomly thrown in as they formed in the students' minds without proper links either to the preceding paragraph or sentence. It is also observed that the topic sentences are scattered throughout their essays instead of being used to mark the argument of succeeding paragraphs. Thus, students' exposition substituted for argument. Students' writing as depicted in the sample argument essays demonstrate discourse practices that are incompatible with the academic literacy expectations at university.

CONCLUSION

The limited capacity of facilitators in second language discursive expression, accounts for the students' lack of a developed schema for this genre. As teaching and social interaction are regarded as the primary means of heightening discursive reasoning in context, this means the social milieu has consistently conspired against the development of this schema. In fact, the socio-cultural background is such that it prompts individuals to perceive a difference of opinion as an attack on the person. As a result, individuals do not strive to resolve differences in ideas rationally and reach consensus, instead, there is a willingness to tolerate ambiguity, untruths and even contradictions. This has resulted in the skill of rationalized argument being pushed away from mainstream interaction and also from teaching and learning. And yet, argument gives allowance to sort through confusion, name ideas, and even mark one's personal development toward insight. The inability to navigate, negotiate and construct meaning has resulted in the cultural idealization of knowledge which in turn foregrounds rampart memorization and regurgitation of academic material which is evident through students' written texts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that since discursive writing is a new culture into which students have to

be socialized, the actual patterns of language use and usage in students' daily academic encounters have to be validated through an enhanced socializing agenda for invigorating training and the skilling of facilitators in order to address the situation effectively. The students who show remarkable interest in and potential in the English language should be allowed and encouraged to specialize in second language teaching in order to become future specialist/facilitators of English. Specialization here means taking English language courses right through their university training, with specialization commencing from second year right through to an honours degree or beyond.

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