

A FRAMEWORK FOR COURSE DESIGN IN ACADEMIC WRITING FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Academic writing is generally regarded as the most important communication medium through which people in the tertiary academic context choose to communicate their ideas. It is also well known that it is sometimes an arduous process for students to become accustomed to the requirements (the conventions and conditions) that hold for the production of appropriate written texts in this context. The initial impetus for the current study was provided by what appeared to be a significant problem that some supervisors at the University of Pretoria identified in terms of the academic writing ability of their postgraduate students.

This study therefore investigates postgraduate academic writing with regard to a number of such issues, and does so within the broader confines of academic literacy. The ultimate purpose of this investigation is to discover how writing interventions may be designed that offer appropriate assistance to students who experience difficulty with their writing.

The study commences with an attempt to find support for treating 'academic discourse' as a potentially productive area of academic enquiry. It therefore presents an account on the nature of a 'discourse community', and attempts to ascertain whether there are any grounds on which 'academic discourse' may be regarded as a unique type of discourse used for specific communicative functions in the tertiary academic environment. It further discusses critically some of the traditional features of academic texts.

The research then proposes thirteen design principles that serve as injunctions that should be considered in the development of writing courses, and proceeds to a critical discussion of the most important approaches in the teaching and learning of writing. What is evident from this discussion is that none of the historical approaches will, on their own, enable one to design justifiable writing courses. As a result, an eclectic approach is required in order to integrate the strengths of these approaches into a strategy for writing course design that is theoretically and practically justifiable.

Subsequently, the critical interpretation of the literature in the first part of the study is used in the design of a framework for writing course design in tertiary education. This framework consists of six focuses that stand in a relationship of dynamic interaction towards a description of the context in which tertiary students write. Thus, relevant aspects concerning the writer, text, reader, institutional context and one's approach to writing are all essential elements that should be carefully considered in terms of their potential influence on the eventual design of materials that will constitute a writing course.

The rest of the study consists of an application of the proposed framework that addresses firstly, the perceptions of supervisors at the University about the academic literacy ability of their postgraduate students, as well as their requirements for academic writing. It then proceeds to an investigation of a specific group of students' (from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences) perceptions about their own academic literacy ability and a determination of their perceptions and expectations of academic writing at university. Because the information that was collected (by means of questionnaires) in both cases mentioned above is mainly perceptual in nature, it was considered essential to determine the academic literacy ability of students in the study group by means of a reliable testing instrument. A written text that these same students produced was further analysed in order to establish possible writing difficulties they experienced. In addition, it was important to confirm certain findings from the supervisor questionnaire, and more specific information had to be collected on particular writing issues that could inform discipline specific writing course design (this was accomplished through focus group interviews with supervisors of the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences).

A combination of all the prominent findings of the empirical work mentioned above, as well as insights gained in the literature survey, is then used to make justifiable suggestions for the design of writing course materials for students in the study group.

Finally, a number of issues were identified that could not be addressed by this study and, therefore, suggestions are made for future research that may investigate these matters.

Key words: academic discourse; academic literacy; academic English; academic writing; postgraduate writing; tertiary education; language support; language planning; ESL teaching and learning; ESP/EAP; didactics; methodology; writing approach; writing course design.

Opsomming

Oor die algemeen word akademiese skryfwerk beskou as die belangrikste vorm van kommunikasie wat akademici in 'n tersiêre konteks gebruik om hul idees mee te kommunikeer. Dit is verder 'n bekende verskynsel dat dit somtyds vir studente 'n moeisame proses is om gewoon te raak aan die vereistes (die konvensies en kondisies) wat geld vir die skryf van aanvaarbare geskrewe tekste in hierdie konteks. 'n Beduidende probleem wat sommige studieleiers aan die Universiteit van Pretoria geïdentifiseer het in terme van die akademiese skryfvaardigheid van hulle nagraadse studente, het die aanvanklike stimulus vir hierdie studie gebied.

Gevolgtrek ondersoek hierdie studie nagraadse skryfvaardigheid in terme van 'n aantal belangrike skryfkwessies binne die meer omvattende konteks van akademiese geleterdheid. Die uiteindelige doel van die ondersoek is om te bepaal op watter wyse skryfintervensies ontwerp kan word wat gepaste ondersteuning kan bied aan studente wat sukkel met akademiese skryfwerk.

Die studie begin deur die begrip "akademiese diskoers" as 'n potensieel-produktiewe area van akademiese ondersoek te regverdig. Die aard van 'n "diskoersgemeenskap" word omskryf en daar word bepaal of daar enige grondslag is waarop "akademiese diskoers" beskou kan word as 'n unieke diskoers wat vir spesifieke kommunikatiewe funksies binne die tersiêre akademiese konteks gebruik word. Van die tradisionele kenmerke van akademiese tekste word ook krities bespreek.

Die studie stel verder dertien riglyne voor wat oorweeg moet word in die ontwerp van 'n skryfkursus. Dit word gevolg deur 'n kritiese bespreking van die belangrikste benaderings in die onderrig en leer van skryfvaardigheid. Wat duidelik blyk uit hierdie bespreking, is dat nie een van die historiese benaderings op sigself sal lei tot regverdigbare skryfkursusontwerp nie. Gevolgtrek is 'n meer eklektiese benadering nodig wat die relevante aspekte van verskillende benaderings integreer in 'n strategie vir kursusontwerp wat teoreties en prakties regverdigbaar is.

Die kritiese interpretasie van die literatuur in die eerste deel van die studie word daarna gebruik in die ontwerp van 'n raamwerk vir skryfkursusontwikkeling in tersiêre onderrig. Hierdie raamwerk bestaan uit ses fokusareas wat in 'n verhouding van dinamiese interaksie staan ten opsigte van 'n beskrywing van die tersiêre konteks waarbinne studente skryf. Belangrike aspekte rakende die skrywer, teks, leser, institusionele konteks sowel as 'n skryfbenadering, is dus essensiële aspekte wat deeglik oorweeg moet word met betrekking tot hul potensiële invloed op die uiteindelijke ontwerp van materiaal vir 'n skryfkursus.

Die res van die studie bestaan uit 'n toepassing van die voorgestelde raamwerk. Eerstens word studieleiers aan die Universiteit se persepsies oor die akademiese geletterdheidsvermoë van hulle nagraadse studente, sowel as die vereistes wat hulle stel vir akademiese skryfwerk, aangespreek. Vervolgens ondersoek die studie die persepsies van 'n spesifieke groep nagraadse studente (van die Fakulteit Natuur- en Landbouwetenskappe) oor hul eie akademiese geletterdheidsvermoë en daar word ook bepaal wat hul persepsies en verwagtinge is rakende akademiese skryfwerk op universiteitsvlak. Omdat die inligting (wat deur vraelyste versamel is) in beide hierdie gevalle perseptueel van aard is, is dit belangrik geag dat die studente se akademiese geletterdheidsvermoë deur 'n betroubare meetinstrument bepaal word. Daar is ook van dieselfde groep studente verwag om 'n geskrewe teks te produseer wat vervolgens geanaliseer is om moontlike probleemareas in die studente se skryfwerk te identifiseer. Dit was verder ook belangrik om sekere bevindinge uit die studieleiervraelyste te bevestig. Meer volledige inligting oor sekere skryfkewessies moes ook ingesamel word om sodoende die ontwikkeling van skryfkursusse vir spesifieke dissiplines te ondersteun (dit is bereik deur van fokusgroeponderhoude met studieleiers van die Skool vir Landbou- en Voedselwetenskappe gebruik te maak).

'n Kombinasie van al die prominente bevindinge uit die empiriese werk hierbo genoem, tesame met die insigte uit die literatuuroorsig, is gebruik om regverdigbare voorstelle te maak vir die ontwerp van skryfkursusmateriaal vir die studente in die studiegroep.

Ten slotte is 'n aantal kwessies geïdentifiseer wat nie deur hierdie studie aangespreek kon word nie en daarom word voorstelle vir verdere navorsing gemaak wat hierdie aangeleentheid kan ondersoek.

Sleuteltermes: akademiese diskoers; akademiese geletterdheid; akademiese Engels; akademiese skryfwerk; nagraadse skryfwerk; tersiêre onderrig; taalondersteuning; taalbeplanning; onderrig en leer van Engels Tweede Taal; Engels vir spesifieke doeleindes; Engels vir akademiese doeleindes; didaktiek; metodologie; skryfbenadering; skryfkursusontwikkeling.

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