Developments in
English Language Teaching

Socio-Cultural Issues in English for Academic Purposes

EDITED BY
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Introduction

Under its theme, 'Socio-Cultural Issues in English for Academic Purposes', the 1989 SELMOUS Conference drew together and brought up to date many of the threads which ran through the previous eight conferences held over the last fifteen years. The Conference, moreover, marked the first formal occasion on which the new name BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes) was used to replace SELMOUS (Special English Language Materials for Overseas University Students), thus reflecting more accurately the work and interests of the association's members.

Arranged under such headings as 'social affective factors', 'expectations', 'academic writing', 'oral skills and seminars' and 'learning process', the 27 papers presented at the conference were programmed in such a way as to enable delegates to follow a particular theme over the three days. It is hoped that readers will recognise from the nine papers selected for this volume the extent to which such apparently disparate topics (some having been themes of previous conferences) are linked by a shared preoccupation with the socio-cultural framework in which they are set.

The papers approach the theme of the conference from a wide range of perspectives. Most of them, however, view as problematic the process by which the overseas student, as a product of his/her own culture and experience of academic life, can be assimilated into the culture of a British university. The authors take as their focal point one or more of the participants in this process: the overseas or home student, the EAP tutor on pre-sessional and in-sessional courses, or the subject lecturer. These participants are examined for the expectations and presuppositions which they bring to academic discourse, in relation to both their own performance and the behaviour and demands of others. Students are led by their own experience into behaviour which may be deemed inappropriate (Lynch and Anderson, Furneaux *et al.*, Bloor and Bloor). Subject lecturers may fail to recognise overseas students' difficulties as a problem of cultural adaptation to British academic conventions since they are rarely made explicit, even to native-speaker students (Coleman, Bloor and Bloor). EAP tutors may find themselves required to mediate between overseas students and subject lecturers and to interpret the expectations of both parties. Professionally sympathetic to the needs of overseas students, yet, as products themselves of the same tacitly understood academic process, they may feel ill-equipped to make explicit what is required for 'success' in academic performance (Blue).

In addition, students' academic behaviour (for example, writing and participating in seminars), EAP materials, questionnaires and tests are examined for what they reveal about the academic conventions of a particular culture. The interaction of these participants in academic discourse all too often results in what Thomas (1983) has called 'cross-cultural pragmatic failure'.

The pre-eminent role of writing in the British academic context was reinforced at the conference by the large number of papers which dealt with this theme, and this emphasis is reflected in the choice of the first five papers in this collection. All focus on the issues surrounding academic writing and the problems which arise from both home and overseas students being unaware of the 'rules of the game' of this particular discourse community (Houghton, 1984). This lack of awareness is further compounded by there being no formal recognition of the need to learn new or different rules, and this failure may apply not only to the students but also to the teachers involved in the process, who often assume that educational systems and academic requirements are similar across international frontiers.

In the first paper, Bloor and Bloor provide evidence of the kinds of socio-pragmatic failure that results from students' erroneous expectations of the writing requirements of their academic courses. A warning is given of the delicate role that the teacher must play when trying to remedy this situation in order to avoid charges of cultural prejudice or dull standardisation. Coleman, in his paper, describes the thinking behind the attempts to make the new IELTS reading and writing module resemble more closely real academic tasks.

Richards and Skelton's paper explores the critical evaluation required in the written assignments of overseas students, providing evidence from samples of both overseas and home students' work, and concludes that overseas students 'have a much more difficult entrée into the charmed circle of the British academic community because they lack knowledge of what this community does and does not permit'.

Dudley-Evans' paper, however, shows that even for home students membership of this academic community is not automatic. Through an examination of successive drafts of a thesis and the supervisor's comments, he illuminates the process by which a British Ph.D. student is gradually ' "socialised" into the academic community'.

Sa'Adeddin presents a contrastive analysis of Arabic and English 'text linguistic habits' and thereby sheds light on the apparent failure indicated by Richards and Skelton of some Arab writers of English to conform to acceptable academic norms.

Another thread of the conference focuses on oral skills: Furneaux *et al.* investigate the reality of the academic seminar and seek to identify the conflicting expectations concerning its purpose and the appropriate behaviour of both tutor and student participants. Lynch and Anderson's paper is also concerned with the reality of seminar behaviour but focuses more on the degree to which EAP materials purporting to teach seminar/

discussion skills mirror that reality.

Blue's paper turns the focus back on to non-native speaker students with an investigation into the factors which influence the students' perceived language improvement, including their attitudes towards EAP classes, independent language learning and academic studies.

Four of the papers in the collection (Bloor and Bloor, Blue, Furneaux *et al.*, Richards and Skelton) make use of the student questionnaire to obtain data, and this important research tool is the topic of Low's paper, in which he argues the need to take into account pragmatic factors in its design and analysis.

Major lessons from these papers, and from the conference as a whole, can be learnt. First, appropriate behaviour cannot be simply described by means of linguistic models: socio-pragmatic infelicities can cause serious breakdown in communication and at least hinder success if not actually produce condemnation. Secondly, this is not an area of behaviour that can be prescribed: as Thomas has put it, it is a question of 'heightening and refining students' metapragmatic awareness, so that they are able to express themselves as they choose' (1983: p.91).

In recommending courses of action or describing remedies already adopted, these papers are vigilant in their guard against prescriptive statements. In the promotion of cultural relativism and sensitivity, it is just such unthinking dogma that is being fought against.

The Editors

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Contents

Cultural Expectations and Socio-pragmatic Failure in Academic Writing

Meriel Bloor *University of Warwick*
Thomas Bloor *University of Aston*

Introduction

The paper centres on the problems caused by cultural expectations that students have of academic writing. Even students with very good levels of English (English teachers on Master's degree courses with ELTS scores of 7.5, for example) can produce written work that fails to conform to the (largely unwritten) social rules of the academic community. We present examples of some infelicities and try to tease out the nature of the miscalculations that cause them. Our research is based on the analysis of writing by overseas students in university and on the findings of a small survey of students' retrospective views of their expectations about writing in English. The survey consisted of 50 questionnaires (48 returned) and follow-up interviews with 25 students.

False Expectations of Formal Requirements

Most learners enter British universities with certain more or less conscious expectations of what is required. A good pre-sessional course will help to correct the more erroneous of these expectations and give the students a more general understanding of what type of writing tasks will be expected of them in their departments, but initially students from different countries have widely differing expectations about even the *amount* of writing that will be demanded of them.

The survey of students in the University of Warwick indicated that 50 per cent had not expected to be assessed on the basis of written term assignments. They expected only to be assessed on the basis of examinations. Moreover, a majority of those interviewed reported that they had expected these examinations to be objective tests. In fact, written assignments are a compulsory part of all taught courses.

This problem comes very simply from the false expectation that educational structures and systems do not differ internationally. Students, unless they have been instructed to the contrary, may believe that universities in Britain operate very similarly to those in their own country.

To illustrate the complexity of the problem, we would like first to consider one particular case of a student with writing problems. This student, whom we will call Nadia, entered a British university in October 1988 to study for a BA in Economics. She had previously successfully completed two years of a first degree in a university in the Gulf, largely through the medium of English. Although her spoken English is very good and she had an overall points score on ELTS of 6.5 the previous September (as well as a reasonable report from a reputable British language school where she studied in the summer of 1988), she reported very serious problems with written assignments.

One of the questions in the questionnaire read as follows:

> Was there anything unexpected about the assignments in your department? (Try to explain in your own words)

Nadia responded as follows:

> Everything. First of all no written work was asked for in my home university.

In a subsequent interview, she reported that in her home university the assessment is by objective end-of-term examinations where the questions are multiple choice or short answer items. The questions are based on information from set text books and lectures and require no interpretive or critical contribution from the student. If you work hard and know the facts, you can do well. Writing skills are not required—at least at that level.

She has learned that things are very different in her present department. Here the students have to read academic papers reporting key experiments and write evaluative essays discussing methodology and applications and commenting on how to interpret the results. The 'facts', although necessary for inclusion in assignments, are presented as 'given' information (the topic of discussion) but *not* as the essence of the communicative event. The game is not to show the assessor that you *know the facts* but to show the assessor *what you have read and, moreover, what you think about what you have read.* The very best students will be able to do this in the light of the views of other academics and will be able to come up with new hypotheses. The student who merely reiterates what s/he has read in a textbook will get a very poor mark.

Nadia also suffers from a misunderstanding of what is required at the process level. She worries about the fact that she has to do a lot of reading and drafting and re-writing to achieve even a bare pass, and imagines that in some way she is 'cheating' by spending so long on each assignment. She expressed her view that lecturers think that she writes the

assignment straight off in one evening. She believes (falsely) that British students are able to do this. She is fearful of the June examination 'because then the lecturers will believe that I didn't do the assignments myself'. Of course, her perception of the lecturers' expectations is quite false. She wrongly perceives the assignment as a type of exam question that is done at home and believes that the lecturers expect the same level of work in the examinations.

Not only Arabic-speaking students have problems in this respect. An Italian student, for example, also in Economics, replied to the above question:

> The main problem found was about Case Studies where I *tried* to apply the theory learnt in lectures. However, this was not what the tutor wanted. He required much more empirical analysis of the data available. Since in Italy we are not used to write neither essays nor answers to case studies, you try to find out what English students did in the same topics in the former academic year.

Some of these students' difficulties can be solved by direct instruction and explanation – although this has to be given by the English language teachers. Nadia's personal tutor, an academic with no previous experience of overseas undergraduates, finds it very difficult to understand her problems. He dismisses her as 'a bundle of trouble who worries about nothing and just needs to work a lot harder'.

The Problems of Plagiarism

Students who come to study at postgraduate level in Britain base their expectations on the nature of their undergraduate work. If, like Nadia, they have studied in a context where *what you know* is the all-important factor in gaining academic success, they may fall into the trap of unintentional plagiarism.

Fortunately, this phenomenon is relatively rare in comparison with the other problems we discuss here, probably because students are usually warned of the pitfalls in this respect, but where it does occur it can be disastrous for the individual concerned since it may result in failure or disgrace. In brief, what usually occurs is that a student who is trying to use reference materials, and who has read, perhaps widely, on the subject in hand, fails to acknowledge the sources of his or her ideas. Problems also arise with the use of technical terms and short extracts from other writers.

The student who explained the difference between 'simplified versions' and 'simple accounts' without a reference to Widdowson (1978) managed to miss two birds with one stone: he not only missed the chance of getting credit for having read Widdowson, he also laid himself open to the criticism of plagiarism. He argued succinctly that *Teaching Language as Communication* was on the reading list and in his bibliography, that

the lecturer who set the assignment knew that it was on the reading list, and that the fact that he had explained Widdowson's arguments showed that he had done the required work. What more did we want?

A more serious example was brought to our attention by a member of a university disciplinary committee that had been set up to investigate a case of an overseas student accused of plagiarism on the submission of his Ph.D. in Physics. One of the problems concerned the methodology section. Clearly, in experimental Physics the method employed for the research is of considerable importance and must be described in the thesis.

It is not unusual for a student to use well-tried methods, but, where this happens, it is accepted practice that full reference is given to previous research employing the methods concerned and especially to the original designer/s of the experiment. Moreover, the equipment, and the layout of the equipment, has to be described in the writer's own words. All this the student had failed to do. He argued that he did not realise that this was expected, and that, since no one concerned could have really believed that he had invented the method or designed the equipment, which was well-known to physicists and had been used before in a Ph.D. project in the department, he could not be accused of plagiarism. The physicists disagreed. A member of the Law Faculty and an applied linguist were invited to the committee as 'expert witnesses', and it was only with difficulty that they were able to make the case that this was not deliberate fraud by the student.

In both these cases we can see evidence of a distinct approach to knowledge that differs from the approach approved by the discourse community. In the international academic world, all contributions, from the creation of technical terms through the design of research methods right up to the formulation of elevated theories, are valued and must be acknowledged by other users. In Goffman's terms, they are not 'free goods' (Goffman, 1967). To use Thomas's (1983) paraphrase, 'Free goods are those which, in a given situation, anyone can use without seeking permission'.

If we wish to reproduce someone's written work in its original form, we must literally seek permission or break copyright laws. If we wish to refer to someone's research, even if we use our own words, the discourse community expects us to acknowledge that we do not 'own' it. To Goffman, the issue of free goods concerns what could be used or requested without special permission or mitigating strategies. In Lakoff's (1974) extension of the term, 'free goods' are topics one may talk freely about. In our own extension, they become knowledge that is available for free discussion. The physics student mentioned above perceived experimental methods as free goods whereas his examiners did not.

Nevertheless there seems to be a tacit agreement in the academic community that ideas which are long-standing and well-established enter the free goods market. For example, linguists do not need to provide acknowledgements for the sources of the parts of speech every time they refer to a noun, and the scientist does not need to provide references if

he refers to the fact that the temperature decreases as altitude increases, but the line between free goods and non-free goods is very finely drawn. Pythagoras still gets a mention if we refer to the squares of right-angled triangles, yet we *can* mention competence without referring to Chomsky.

Discussing the reporting of high-level scientific research, Myers (1989) suggests that a citation is a type of 'gift' from one member of a community to another, but we think it is hard to use this metaphor for student writing, even at Ph.D. level. Here it is the duty of the writer to 'pay' for the use of others' knowledge with citations, and he will be punished if he fails in this debt.

Acknowledgements

Similarly, all assistance from others must be acknowledged, and strict conventions dictate what is permitted in the expression of thanks for the goods that have been received. Conventions must be observed and, as with the maxims of conversation (Grice, 1975), those who break them are likely to produce effects of irony or humour. It is interesting to note that, while no serious academic would claim that the contents of the Acknowledgements section of a dissertation is central, flouting of the conventions can be at best embarrassing and at worst offensive.

A native speaker who wrote the following acknowledgement (example 1 below) would be accused of sarcasm or of trying to get a cheap laugh:

1 I owe a debt of gratitude to ... my supervisor whose perspicacious advice and guidance has enabled me to carry out this arduous study. Her amazing zeal is only matched by her wondrous teaching skills and impressive learning.

In fact, it was written in all seriousness by a student from Cameroon, as part of the Acknowledgements for a Master's thesis. The tone of the message was drawn from the normal practice in the Central African French academic tradition. He was sure that anything less fulsome would appear rude or ungrateful to his supervisor, whom he genuinely admired. When it was suggested that he modify the style to better suit English language conventions, he agreed to omit 'wondrous'.

In addition to the excessive praise lavished on the supervisor, example 1 includes a common stylistic lapse in the writer's reference to his own work. Modesty (affected or otherwise) prevents most English-speakers from referring to their work as 'arduous'—at least at the level of an MA dissertation which has still to be assessed. In published volumes, such references to the effort involved are usually embedded in acknowledgements to spouse and children and are often given a jocular twist, see for example Bennet-Kastor below:

2 My husband, Frank Sullivan Kastor, has been enormously supportive in a number of ways: reading drafts, providing sympathy and encouragement and taking a rambunctious child or two out of the way when I needed to focus my energies on the project (Bennet-Kastor, 1988: p.ix).

So far this is within normal limits: the humorous note is there in *rambunctious* and *child or two*. But to be fair to the non-native perpetrators of acknowledgement gaffes, there are precedents for more than a touch of self-importance. Bennet-Kastor goes on:

> 3 And I thank God that I was able to sustain the energy to complete the project before my return to teaching in the summer of 1988.

She follows her acknowledgement of the deity with one to her deceased grandfather, in the course of which she writes:

> 4 It is my hope that he might have been proud of his granddaughter's accomplishment (ibid: p.x)

Perhaps the conventions are changing.

But even though we must not appear too fulsome or too hardworking, neither must we appear too grudging or too lazy. Example 5 also misses the target, though perhaps only just:

> 5 The work of writing this dissertation has been a co-operative venture and I am grateful to (name of friend) who helped me a great deal.

The external examiner wondered which of them deserved the degree!

Even so, once again, there are precedents for comparable generous allocation of credit in published works, for example in Michael Stubbs' semi-humorous acknowlegement of Margaret Berry:

> 6 I have plundered her notes to an extent that verges on co-authorship (Stubbs, 1983: p.xi)

But Stubbs was not submitting his work for the award of a degree.

The same student who thanked his friend for his help in a 'co-operative venture' thanked his supervisor for her 'occasional advice', which suggests to most academics that the supervisor was not doing her job properly.

The fact is that dedications vary greatly across cultures. So much so that it is not unknown for overseas students writing in English to refuse advice from supervisors about dedications because they feel the need to impress readers from their own culture who will feel aggrieved if the dedication seems inappropriate.

One student insisted on his right to leave in a two page Acknowledgements section in which he thanked, in turn:

> His teachers on the course (each individually named)
> His supervisor
> His professors in his home country
> The British Council and ODA
> His colleagues back home who had sent him data
> His wife
> The trainees who had answered his questionnaire (not listed individually, however)
> The typist

The paragraph acknowledging the help of the wife is a classic example of cultural infelicity:

7 I owe a great deal of my work to my wife, who is only a nurse and scarcely knows English nor teacher training but did her best to collect materials and send them to me.

This manages to offend our cultural norms not only because of apparent sexism and social elitism, but also because he suggests that his work is not his own.

Judging the degree of responsibility one can shuffle onto others' shoulders in an Acknowledgements section is a subtle matter. Devices by which we can thank others for their help and yet not blame them for our errors have become almost automatic in some fields. Wide reading familiarises students with acceptable forms and the wise avoid over-creative efforts like the Acknowledgements presented in verse from which we offer samples in 8 (with names changed to protect the innocent).

8 With Love and Gratitude
The work is done now I can sit and relax
But not before I say some special words of thanks
To Jenny and Robert our lecturers dear
A solemn promise to be ever most sincere
I gained knowledge, advice and support from you
I can't help but be forever true
Sweet Mary, my supervisor, a jewel so rare,
Generous in advice and tender loving care,
Never giving me a chance for fear or despair . . .
With what words, could I all this repay?
Could words of thanks the heart's content display?
Not least of all to Jane who took the pains
to type, correct and organise—and What remains?

What indeed we may ask? Surprisingly, what does remain is a perfectly reasonable dissertation, written by an intelligent MA student.

Issues of directness and concession

There are clearly identifiable cultural differences in the degrees of directness and concession permitted (or encouraged) in academic writing in different languages. Stubbs (1986), in his discussion of how the concepts of commitment and detachment can explain some central syntactic phenomena, notes how 'such aspects of language are a notorious problem for foreign learners.'

In recent years, it has come to the attention of linguists that, contrary to the popular belief that academic writing is 'impersonal and factual', a number of such genres in English are rich in hedged propositions. We can cite, for example, the work of Myers (1989) on scientific journal articles and Bloor and Pindi (1987) on economics forecasts as well as Rounds

(1982). Myers convincingly explains these features in terms of politeness strategies employed for the purpose of redressing what Brown and Levinson (1987) term Face-Threatening Activities (FTA's). Thus, we find examples such as 9, taken from Myers:

> 9 We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (DVA). This structure has novel features which are of considerable biological interest.
>
> A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Correy. They kindly made their manuscript available to us in advance of publication. . . . In our opinion, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: . . .
>
> Watson, J. and F.H. Crick (1953) 'A structure for deoxyribose nucleic acid', *Nature* 171: p.737.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a popular view that scientific writing is 'impersonal and factual' and it is not surprising when students who have been subjected to such a view find it difficult to orientate themselves to using (negative and positive) politeness strategies in their writing. Skelton (1988) observes that a type of 'crude' unhedged writing is more typical of second or foreign language use than of native speaker use, even of poor adult writers, and that accords with our experience.

How can we account for this problem, appearing as it does in students who have good control of the grammar and lexis of the language?

The answer to this question is not clear cut. There are at least three possible explanations:

1 It may be that the students have language problems stemming from the fact that they have not been taught sufficient devices or expressions as alternatives to the 'bald-on-record' approach, (Brown and Levinson). This would be a linguistic lack for an understood social phenomenon.
2 It may be that the social phenomenon itself is not appreciated because, as students, the writers do not themselves yet have sufficient knowledge of any academic discourse community.
3 It may be that students have false expectations of the social relationships and concomitant social behaviour required within the discourse community because of the different rules which operate within parallel communities in their own culture. This would be similar to the phenomenon termed by Thomas (1983) 'socio-pragmatic failure' (after Leech) defined as failure which 'stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour'.

While it is likely that all three of these explanations may play a part in fully accounting for particular cases of failure, we wish to concentrate here on the third explanation because in some cultures clear differences in social expectations can be identified.

German and Czech students, for example, report that they have been

taught to write directly and to avoid modifications in essay writing in their own languages. 'Write what you know, not what you suppose', quoted one German student. Interviews with Czech linguists[1] have confirmed that a much more direct, unhedged style is favoured in journal articles in Czech, while in Germany popular style manuals for undergraduate students of science and technology firmly advise them to eschew modifications in any form and to write in a direct factual style.

This seems to reflect features of spoken language (what are sometimes thought of as 'cultural characteristics') that have been described in the literature. In addition to the observations of Littlewood (1983) and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), there is the research of Edmondson *et al.* (1984) which provides evidence that in conversational English native speakers use more interpersonally oriented expressions than their German counterparts and that in German speakers 'tend to realise requests and complaints more directly than English speakers'. Requests and complaints fall into the category of FTAs, the same category in which Myers places the claims of the scientific writer who is challenging or superseding the claims of other members of the academic community. In English FTAs are mitigated, but Edmondson *et al.* also report that when German learners speak English 'inherently face-threatening acts like *request, complaint, object* and *reject* tend to be performed directly and without mitigation.'

Thus the written mode tends to reflect the spoken mode in the degree of mitigation considered acceptable in FTAs.

We have not yet investigated published papers in German to verify the truth of this for mature writers in German. It may be the case that German writers do, in fact, use some stylistic exponents to express degrees of commitment to propositions while, simultaneously, they believe themselves to be writing without encoding their point of view, for a lot of advice in style manuals fails to reflect the practice of successful writers. Nevertheless, the advice is accepted by the better students who take it seriously, and it falls to the teacher of writing in English to restructure the learners' expectations of what good writing in English consists of.

Further evidence that cultural expectations differ comes from the AILA (UNESCO) LSP Bulletin, which publishes a paper (Kulesza, 1989) which lists what are claimed to be 'the typical style markers of LSP'. The futility of identifying style markers for *language* rather than *a* language is evidenced by the fact that the list contains no mention of hedging, or of other types of modulation. Moreover, Kulesza includes as typical features 'no repetitions, paraphrases or in-text summaries'. This is so clearly untrue for English, where paraphrase and summary are essential, both in reference to previous research and as devices for textual organisation, that one can only conclude that Kulesza's perception of LSP is culturally flavoured by academic writing in her native Polish.