Teaching academic writing to students with English as second language
L'insegnamento della scrittura accademica con Inglese come seconda lingua

Daniele Morselli
University of Helsinki
daniele.morselli@helsinki.fi

ABSTRACT

The article on university pedagogy paper presents a course on academic writing for PhD students with English as second language delivered according to Biggs' theory of constructive alignment. The article starts by reviewing the literature on academic writing and English as second language, and presents the theory of constructive alignment with intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and evaluation applied to academic writing. It argues that peer review and academic writing are two complementary process, and that a course on academic writing focusing on publishing internationally has to embed them both in group activities. The article demonstrates the features of the course and ends by discussing its generativity for research, as it promotes a deep approach thus enhancing research results even in terms of theorization.

L'articolo di didattica universitaria presenta un corso in scrittura accademica su riviste internazionali per dottorandi con inglese come seconda lingua impartito coi principi della teoria dell'allineamento costruttivo di Biggs. L'articolo inizia con una rivista della letteratura sulla scrittura accademica con l'inglese come seconda lingua, e presenta la teoria dell'allineamento costruttivo che coniuga i risultati d'apprendimento previsti, le attività d'insegnamento e d'apprendimento, e la valutazione. La tesi sostenuta è che le attività di scrittura accademica e di peer review siano complementari, e un corso debba incorporarle entrambe in lavori di gruppo. Applicando la teoria dell'allineamento costruttivo, si mostra una proposta d'implementazione di corso in scrittura accademica, e si conclude spiegando i suoi processi generativi, dal momento che promuoverebbe un approccio approfondito alla ricerca, migliorando i risultati anche in termini di teorizzazione.

Introduction

In Italy PhD students prefer publishing their article in Italian journals rather than international journals. Although they have interesting doctoral dissertations with data that could impress the scientific community, it is difficult for them to take international publishing into consequent steps. This is because of two problems: on the one hand students do not know how to write an academic article, and, on the other hand, their English proficiency is not adequate. As far as the Italian as their mother tongue, the problem is twofold. From one angle, the fact that both Italian and English share to some extent Latin origins[1] helps in wording and grammar. From another angle, the Italian academic writing diverges from English academic writing: the aim is primarily to impress the reader about the writers' knowledge, and the reader should be blamed if he or she does not understand the content. By way of contrast, the English academic writer writes for 'busy' readers, and considers him/herself responsible for being understood. This means that the writing must be intelligible, and that the reader is led with a 'silver thread' through the article (Norris, 2014).

According to the theory of constructive alignment useful for designing a curriculum at the university, the objective of the course in terms of learning outcomes, the teaching and learning methods and the evaluation should be aligned (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This article argues that peer review and academic writing are two complementary process, and that a course on academic writing and publishing internationally has to embed both in group activities; in so doing, the learning outcomes, the teaching and learning activities and the assessment are aligned. The next section shows a literature review, and discusses the general issues related to academic writing and the specific problems that students with English as second language encounter in academic writing. Others topics reviewed are group work and peer-reviewing in academic writing.

1. Literature review

In the literature it is acknowledged that many undergraduate and graduate students do not understand both the importance of peer review and the process of academic writing, as well as their mutual constitutive relationship (Guilford, 2001). Students in engineering and applied sciences, for example, do not recognize the value of good writing, and still it has been calculated that future engineers employ one third of their time in writing. This issue has led faculties around world to think of programs seeking to simulate the process of publishing: some courses teach for different peer-reviewing strategies; others have the students writing their paper according to the strict guidelines of journals; while others include a peer reviewing process from peers. Each of these methods is considered good by students both in strengthening their writing skills and improving their publication rates. Concerning the peer reviewing process, not only is it an educational tool for students, but also a way to decrease the instructor's workload (Guilford, 2001).

In a study conducted at the Virginia University, 39 undergraduate students in engineering enrolled in an academic writing course based on a strict simulation

---

1   English derives in part from French which comes from Latin, whereas Italian is a direct filiation of Latin.

Daniele Morselli

of double blind peer-reviewing process; 91% of them stated their appreciation to peer-reviewing process as educational tool. Guildford (2001) concludes that asking undergraduates to write following journal guidelines assures higher quality paper, as well as better comprehension of the meaning of peer reviewing as improving process. There are three orders of outcomes. First, undergraduates learn about technical and scientific process of publishing up to the acceptance of their manuscript. Secondly, students learn that peer-reviewing is a valuable process. Thirdly, students learn how to write with respect to journal guidelines. In the study students also suggested that multiple rounds of review would be beneficial to improve their academic writing skills. More recent studies confirm Guilford's (2001) findings on peer-review as process to be matched with academic writing, and engaging students in peer-reviewing processes definitely strengthens their academic writing (Chittum & Bryant, 2014).

What Guildford does not mention in her study, however, is group-work as a modality for peer-reviewing and academic writing. Generally speaking, it is acknowledged that group work is a more effective teaching tool than the lecture (Biggs & Tang, 2011), as it requires learners to apply their knowledge in a critical way. In the teaching technique, for example, students are put into pairs, and the underlying principle is that teaching peer-reviewing deepens students' understanding. Peer-reviewing resembles case-based learning where students have to *apply* their knowledge and *critically evaluate* the peer's work. All these methods share that the reflective abilities are challenged as the learner can compare one's learning with their peers' learning. One of the prerequisites is to own the background to actively contribute to the discussion. However, also a 'democratic' climate has to encouraged so that students can interact cooperatively without the fear to be misjudged (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Concerning the peer-assessment in academic writing, there is evidence of its value: in a study involving 12 graduate students in educational psychology, formative peer assessment was considered by students as time consuming and creating discomfort, but also effective in promoting high quality writing (Topping, Smith, Swanson, & Elliot, 2000). As far as the group work as a modality for academic writing, there is a vast consensus in the literature that writing groups improve the productivity of their participants as well as the overall quality of the manuscripts (Wardale et al., 2015). To do so the writing group has to share a common goal and reflection in action as a method to consider the formation and evolution of the group. It is also important that the group be heterogeneous both in terms of career stage and multi-disciplinary of the participants, thus allowing for content cross-fertilization.

However, the literature suggests that students using English as second language may present additional issues in academic writing; in this regard scholars have concentrated on international students studying in countries with English as first language. While international students learn the principles of academic writing, for example the writing style and the article structure, they also have to learn how to write correct English, for example grammar and punctuation. It is known that international students tend to plagiarize more than their mother tongue counterparts, even though most of the times this is unintentional; in other words, international students do not quote as they should, or they cut and paste text instead of making paraphrases as suggested for example by the APA rules. Academic programs for the development of writing reduces unintentional plagiarism (Divan, Bowman, & Seabourne, 2015). Furthermore, a study with humanities international doctoral students shows that international students often feel marginalized, since the writing and style conventions typical of their mother tongue are considered a stigma and an obstacle to write in proper English (Maringe & Jenkins, 2015). However, the knowledge of English as a prerequisite for academic writing is an essen-

tial; a study seeking to match the IELTS[2] band score of students with the number of errors in essays found that: 6.0 band leads to 206 errors every 1000 words; 6.5 band is equal 96 errors; whereas 7 band score corresponds to 35 errors (Müller, 2015). The author concludes that it would be probably more effective for universities to raise the entry requirements for degrees rather than trying to remediate the students' proficiency and academic writing. In other words, the first step would be that the students have an excellent mastery of English, for example C1 of the European Framework or IELTS band score 7, and only then they attend specific courses to enhance their academic writing skills. It is likely that students studying in countries with English as second language (for example Italians or Finns), when having to publish in English in international journals, have similar issues of international students in countries with English as first language. In English as second language pedagogy, Hinkel (2013) has made a list of areas of grammar construction essentials for academic writers: sentence construction; verbs and the verb phrase; noun clauses in and for restatement and paraphrase; nouns, noun phrases, and pronouns; adverb clauses and adverbs; and exemplification markers.

2. The course structure

As suggested by Biggs & Tang (2011), a course should be designed according to the constructive alignment of the learning outcomes, the teaching and learning activities, and the evaluation:

> The intended outcomes specify the activity that students should engage if they are to achieve the intended outcome as well as the content the activity refers to. The teacher's tasks are to set up a learning environment that encourages the student to perform those learning activities, and to assess student performances against the intended learning outcomes. (p. 97)

The learning outcomes are formulated with verbs at the infinite forms according to the relational and extended abstract levels of the SOLO taxonomy. SOLO stands for Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome, and "provides a systematic way of describing how a learner's performance grows in complexity when mastering many academic tasks" (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 89). The taxonomy comes from the need to engage students in meaningful tasks, and seeks to promote a deep approach to study. It can be applied to any subject, and is made of five levels of increasing complexity in the understanding of a topic. The verbs utilized in the SOLO taxonomy entail qualitative rather than quantitative learning, the aim is to move from increasing knowledge to deepening understanding, thus generating new concepts and knowledge. The learning outcomes of the course in academic writing and publishing internationally could be: explaining why it is important to write using standard criteria; *applying* peer reviewing to a manuscript, *reflecting* on its issues and suggest how to improve it; *applying* the rules of scientific writing to a set of own data or to a theoretical idea that the subject would like to write about to theorize; *reflecting* on one's own English proficiency, writing style and attitude and *generating* processes of continuous improvement.

The teaching and learning activities should focus on the students' learning, and

---

2   The International English Language Testing System, is an international standardised test of English language proficiency for non-native English language speakers. IELTS has not pass or fail, but is scored on a nine-band scale, with each band corresponding to a specified competence in English.

Daniele Morselli

engage the student in the same activities that represents the learning outcomes. The activities chosen for a course in academic writing are: lectures, group work, discussions, and a reading group. Starting from the reading group, this would be a chapter of a book on academic writing, such as Peat, Elliott, Baur, and Keena (2002). One student could prepare the questions for the whole group based on the SOLO taxonomy. The students would read a chapter at home and answer to the questions during the reading group. The brief lectures concern academic writing (for example the end focus technique, Italian vs. Anglo-American structure, avoiding a blank computer screen), and publishing internationally (how to choose the journal, APA norms for referencing, peer-reviewing). Lectures would be followed by group work on peer-reviewing parts of manuscripts written by the students and feed-back followed by discussions. Other group could include work includes exercises on academic writing and following discussion and reflections.

Concerning the assessment, the form put in place is group peer review. This means that students working in pairs read a part of the manuscript of their colleague and write advice on how to improve it. The authors receive the suggestions and makes the necessary improvements at home. In so doing, students learn how to write and publish by preparing their manuscript for submission, meaning that the evaluation is aligned with the intended learning outcome. The peer-assessment is a form of formative assessment, it gives feed-back to the students on how well they are writing and gives directions for improvement; this is a key element for a type Y climate of trust where it is assumed that "students give their best when they are given freedom and space to use their own judgement" (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 41). Furthermore, multiple rounds of peer-reviewing would help the students to strengthen their manuscript further.

According to Peat et al. (2002) the main elements of an article are: introduction, methods, results, tables & figures, discussion, and the references. Each of them could be dealt with in a meeting; as a result the overall course could span eight meetings, that is four months. In so doing students would have two weeks between each meeting to: read a chapter for the reading group; write a different part of their article; improve the previous part in the light of the peer-reviewers' suggestions; and reflect on their academic writing and publishing skills. Each meeting could last 5-6 hours divided as following: 1 hour for the reading group, 2 hours for the academic writing, 2 hours on the peer reviewing process. The table below is a possible example of course with an outline of each meeting[3].

Meeting	Reading Group	Academic Writing	Peer Reviewing
1	Introduction to the course	Reducing ambiguity	The basics of peer-reviewing
2	Scientific writing	Italian Vs American British writing style	The introduction
3	Getting Started	Avoiding a blank computer screen	The methods
4	Writing your paper (1)	Choose your journal	The results
5	Writing your paper (2)	Detect and fix plagiarism	Tables and figures
6	Finishing your paper	Length reduction exercise	The conclusions
7	Review and editorial processes	APA referencing and quoting. Using referencing software	References
8	Writing style	Correcting sentences	Title, abstract, keywords Review of the whole paper

3   The reading group is based on the book "Scientific writing, easy when you know how" of Peat et al. (2002). The topics for the lectures and for some group activities come from Norris (2014) and Peal et al. (2002).

Conclusions

The essay started by presenting the state of the art in the literature of academic writing, where two main issues emerge. On the one hand, students often do not know how to write academic papers, and on the other hand, students with English as second language experience feelings of helplessness while their mother tongue seems to hamper their academic writing skills. Research shows that courses on academic writing with varied methods are effective in improving the quality of writing and the possibilities to be published. Among the specific pedagogies suggested there is a combination of academic writing and peer reviewing through group work activities. Furthermore, students with English as second language need to strengthen their ability to write in terms of grammar and sentence construction.

The course of academic writing and publishing internationally combines the research findings on academic writing with the principles of constructive alignment. The learning outcomes with verbs such as applying, evaluating and reflecting; the teaching and learning activities in form of lectures, discussions, group work, and reading group; and the evaluation in form of group peer-review are aligned so that the students learn academic writing and publishing in international journals by writing and peer-reviewing. In so doing, during the course they assemble their manuscript on their doctoral research, which can be submitted to the chosen journal at the end of the course.

A last consideration belongs to the connection between the highest levels of Biggs & Tang' (2011) SOLO taxonomy and academic writing and peer-reviewing seen as generative processes. It is known from Vygotsky (1986) that writing is a cultural tool that mediates and improves the quality of thinking. Not only would this course encourage students with English as second language to publish their results in international journals. It is suggested that *a course of academic writing and peer reviewing delivered according to the theory of constructive alignment helps doctoral students to deepen their learning approach towards the dissertation and theory behind*. In so doing, *a generative process (Margiotta, 2015) is created between writing, peer-reviewing and thinking about their own theory and doctoral dissertation thus encompassing the extended abstract levels of the SOLO taxonomy* such as generating, creating, formulating, reflecting, hypothesizing, theorizing. In other words, a generative process would be triggered by the course allowing *students to deepen their approach to learning and apply it to their research study, thus improving their findings and theory behind*.

References

Biggs, J. B., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university. What the student does*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Chittum, J. R., & Bryant, L. H. (2014). Reviewing to Learn: Graduate Student Participation in the Professional Peer-Review Process to Improve Academic Writing Skills. *International Journal of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education, 26*(3).

Divan, A., Bowman, M., & Seabourne, A. (2015). Reducing unintentional plagiarism amongst international students in the biological sciences: An embedded academic writing development programme. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 39*(3), 358-378.

Guilford, W. H. (2001). Teaching peer review and the process of scientific writing. *Advances in physiology education, 25*(3), 167-175.

Hinkel, E. (2013). Research findings on teaching grammar for academic writing. *English Teaching, 68*(4), 3-21.

Margiotta, U. (2015). *Teoria della formazione*. Roma: Carocci.

Maringe, F., & Jenkins, J. (2015). Stigma, tensions, and apprehension: The academic writing experience of international students. *International Journal of Educational Management, 29*(5), 609-626. doi:doi:10.1108/IJEM-04-2014-0049

Müller, A. (2015). The differences in error rate and type between IELTS writing bands and their impact on academic workload. *Higher Education Research & Development*(ahead-of-print), 1-13.

Norris, C. B. (2014). *Academic Writing in English*. Language Services, University of Helsinki.

Peat, J. K., Elliott, E., Baur, L., & Keena, V. (2002). *Scientific writing: easy when you know how*: BMJ books London, UK:.

Topping, K. J., Smith, E. F., Swanson, I., & Elliot, A. (2000). Formative Peer Assessment of Academic Writing Between Postgraduate Students. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 25*(2), 149-169. doi:10.1080/713611428

Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Wardale, D., Hendrickson, T., Jefferson, T., Klass, D., Lord, L., & Marinelli, M. (2015). Creating an oasis: some insights into the practice and theory of a successful academic writing group. *Higher Education Research & Development*(ahead-of-print), 1-14.