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Conceptualisation and teaching of academic writing in an ESL context : a case study with first year university students.

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Abstract

The present thesis is based on a Case Study of an academic writing course, the Written English I module, in the Rwandan context of English as Second Language. The study was motivated by reports about low academic writing abilities of Rwandan students, abilities which were likely to be worsened by the recent decision of switching to English as the medium of instruction for almost all levels of the Rwandan education system. The study was also particularly motivated by the existing paucity of research on L2 writing in the African context.

The study thus set out to investigate institutional discourses, conceptualisations, and teaching practices related to the module with focus on (a) the existing institutional discourse regarding academic literacy practices, (b) lecturers' understanding of academic literacy and expectations of students, and (c) the pedagogical and assessment practices used in the module.

The research was framed by pedagogic and academic literacy theories to understand conceptualisations and practices associated with the module under investigation. Indeed, the investigation was carried out with reference to recent developments in academic writing theories problematising the effectiveness of teaching approaches based on a series of decontextualised skills that students have to learn. The study was particularly underpinned by the view suggesting understanding students' difficulties based on their language background and the specificity of the sociolinguistic context in which they have evolved. That is, the social practices model of academic writing which has the advantage of being inherently hybrid incorporating both the technical skills and the discourse practices demanded in the social institution of HE.

The case study method was deemed appropriate as the focus was on understanding of the phenomenon in its natural setting with a particular attention to contextual conditions and experience of the participants (see Lacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009). In terms of data collection methods, the study is based on a qualitative investigation using (i) analysis of

documents such as handouts on 'essay' writing, assignment guidelines, samples of students' writing, (ii) observation of classes, and (iii) interview of lecturers and a sample of students.

With regard to findings, the research highlights challenges related to the dominance of an autonomous model – based on discrete skills – in teaching of academic writing in an ESL context, as is the case for the module investigated. Findings unveil a network of issues at institutional, conceptual and pedagogical levels. Analysis of the investigated teaching and learning process suggests the existence of a link between lecturers' conceptualisations of academic writing and the form of practices used for development of competences in this activity. In other words, the practices as described are at a certain extent underlain by lecturers' views of language and students, as well as what is involved in writing and learning to write. Further, through reflections on the practices in place for the Written English I module, findings of the study suggest paying attention to the approach consisting in viewing literacy as a social practice and problematisation of the autonomous model dominant in the investigated setting. Such an approach, used complementarily with technical skills addressing basic linguistic and structural skills of student-writers, is likely to facilitate novice-writers to find their own strategies to cope and adapt to the new practices and, on long-term, to constitute a new identity as members of academia.

That is why, as indicated in the concluding part of the thesis, an argument is made in favour of a hybrid approach to teaching academic writing in L2 context. Such an approach is presented as likely to help in addressing students' difficulties in terms of the linguistic rules as required by the writing conventions in use, but also in terms of meaning making in the complex disciplinary areas of HE.

Concerning the form of provision of academic writing course geared to first year university students such as the Written English I module, it is to be regarded as a positive move that the provision investigated is located in the main curriculum of the institution as a subject rather than a form of writing support. This leads to the course being treated as a normal-status subject and mainstreamed in the academic activities to such a point that students take the course seriously. However, the course is not supposed to overlook particular requirements related to the context of learning or disciplinary areas of writing.

Recommendations have also been made for further research. These are related to the need of an exploration at the NUR and other Rwandan HE institutions to find out what the general patterns characterising teaching of academic writing in the Rwandan HE are. Research has also been suggested into the assessment and feedback practices foregrounded in the Rwandan HE and their impact on students' engagement with the academic writing as well as the potential development of competences in that activity. Proposition of a study has also been made to examine how the critical issue of disciplinary writing is perceived and approached by lecturers in the Rwandan HE. This research, exploring lecturers' perspectives on hybrid discourses and disciplinary genres in the academic writing course, is seen as likely to help in better illuminating the issue of monolithic conceptions of academic discourse which often characterise classroom practices.