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Raising awareness of academic writing styles: helping doctoral students find their voices in the Academy

Abstract. The article describes a three-year programme supporting doctoral thesis writing. In the first year, the practice of critical socialisation is fostered through materials and methods that help students discover discourse practices in their disciplines; they do this by attending to the variation in academic writing in English by Anglophone and non-Anglophone writers, and receiving correction and feedback on their writing. In the second year, students can join writing groups focusing on the linguistic resources and rhetorical practices associated with their disciplinary writings and, in the third year, they form writers’ groups, in which they obtain focused stylistic and disciplinary feedback on chapters and writing for publication. Both these forms of participation enable students to critique their peers’ writing and to receive feedback on their own texts. The programme aims to equip the students to become effective and independent participants in their various communities of practice.

0. Introduction

The aim of this article is to describe the three-year programme that has been set up at the European University Institute, a research institute situated in Florence (Italy), to support dissertation writing at levels that will enable non-native writers of English to publish internationally. Using a rich notion of style (in which it is assumed that stylistic analyses and tools can be applied to non-literary texts1) and viewing the learner as a knowledgeable early career scholar on the first rungs of the academic ladder, a discussion of several key themes and topics currently debated in the field will be used to provide the background necessary to understand the contextualised pedagogic choices that have been made. In addition to course work offered in the early stages of the doctoral process to some of the students at the Institute, these choices include the introduction of individual text revision and feedback at key points of the programme as well as the opportunity to work in disciplinary writers’ groups, both of which have proved them-

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1 “These twin ideas of communicative effects and assumptions are the kingpins of an approach to academic writing based on the pedagogic notion of comparative stylistics. By adopting such an approach, our aim is to raise researchers’ awareness of the very diverse styles which their own and English writing cultures foster, and to use this awareness to make informed choices as they undertake the challenge of writing their PhDs” (Owtram 2011: 4).
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selves to be powerful tools for learning. After placing our approach to working with doctoral students within this broader pedagogic frame and following a brief description of the Institute, the programme will be presented, together with the motivations underlying the introduction of certain offerings.

1. Setting the context

My colleague Nicola HARGREAVES and I first began to teach academic writing courses in the Institute around fifteen years ago, as an increasing number of doctoral students began to want to write their theses in English. In order to provide support for doctoral writing, we initially offered EAP courses to groups that were formed according to a model of increasing language proficiency. However, we began very quickly to feel that this structure did not provide realistic support for thesis writing and so we cast around for other ways of doing things. An alternative way of supporting our highly motivated and competent students (most of whom already speak three languages) was – we began to believe – by shifting the focus of learning towards one of ‘discovery’ – discovery of how to do things, discovery of genres and styles, discovery of how to convey one’s own voice. This led to a shift in the way that we viewed our role as teachers and the offerings that we made.

We began to investigate how styles and the conventions by which styles can be represented are understood and transmitted, and found a very useful model in SPERBER’s idea of representations (SPERBER/HIRSCHFELD 1999: CXXII). In his view, the notion is a useful heuristic to help explain “how reiterated experience leads individuals to believe that some forms are more acceptable than others” (OWTRAM 2010: 93). The focus on the individual as well as the public implicit in this notion led us to gradually realise that one of the most useful things we could do for our students was to help them learn to express themselves by observing and critiquing the conventions currently underpinning Anglo-American academic styles, styles that – like it or not – currently dominate the world of international publishing.

A further discovery for us was the work being done in the field of academic literacies, which places the study of literacy firmly in the field of social practice (LILLIS/SCOTT 2007). Familiarising ourselves with this line of enquiry was another important step that enabled us to move beyond a focus on writing as purely textual practice and to enrich our conceptual framework to one of writers-as-actors-within-a-context. Of course, the academic literacies research goes very closely hand in hand with the social constructivist turn that teaching in higher education has taken, with its push towards communities of practice (LAVE/WENGER 1991) as a guideline for the construction of identity and its focus on context as informing practitioners about what needs to be done, for whom things need to done, and how this can be put into practice (CARLILE/JORDAN 2005). As HYLAND points out, argumentative discourses are not claims for truth, but are instead reasoned arguments which employ the “persuasive practices of their disciplines, encoding ideas, employing warrants, and framing argu-
ments in ways that their audience is likely to find convincing” (HYLAND 2009: 12). This situates academic reasoning very firmly within a community-of-practice approach.

With this background in mind, let us now look at the European University Institute in greater detail, as this is the environment for which we have designed and developed our curriculum and made our pedagogic choices. The European University Institute is a fairly new institution: it was founded by the European Community and opened its doors to the first cohort of 70 doctoral students in 1976. It is a highly selective post-graduate (and recently post-doctoral) institute hosting approximately 500 doctoral students recruited from more than 46 countries over the world in economics, history, law, and political and social sciences each year. These students are flanked by the smaller group of post-doctoral fellows, who have usually just completed and defended their doctoral theses and use their year at the Institute to further their own research and publishing, as well as contribute to the Institute’s core work through leading workshops and mentoring.

Following the trend of the last fifteen years or so, the emphasis on working in English has increased in the EUI, as it has in many other higher education institutions in Continental Europe (COLEMAN 2006). There are many reasons for this shift. Given its genesis and focus on comparative research, however, in the Institute an emphasis is not placed only on having good levels of English: on entry, all the students are also expected to have at least a B2 level of proficiency according to the COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE (CEFR) in any of the other languages that they intend to use in order to carry out their research, i.e. for field work, consultation of primary sources, reading original texts, etc. This focus on language proficiency means that we work with people who are used to learning languages and who are usually using more than two languages already. Although this focus on languages is not an automatic guarantee of high levels of proficiency in English, it does mean that the students we work with usually have a high degree of metalinguistic awareness and have developed efficient strategies for language learning.

Hand in hand with the trend towards using English as a vehicular language in the Institute’s academic activities, over the last three years there has been an institutional move to assure that students possess higher levels of proficiency in English on entry. Previously, the placement tests that we carried out during the selection process in order to set up courses for the upcoming academic year were also used to indicate candidates’ levels of English proficiency to the departments. Now, in line with many European universities, the EUI requires candidates who are non-native speakers of English to certify with international certificates that they have reached C1 levels (CEFR) or to make an undertaking that they will work on their English before taking up their places at the Institute if their level is not at C1 at the time of the selection interview.

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2 I will only discuss the work that we do with students in the three departments of history, law, and political and social sciences.

3 Cf. COUNCIL OF EUROPE (2001).
Recent work has underlined the limitations of standardised tests based on the CEFR as regards their value to predict an ability to undertake the writing required by institutions of higher education (BREEZE 2012: 18–23). A further drawback highlighted by several scholars is that students may erroneously believe that having placed well on them, they are fully equipped to carry out graduate work. An additional concern which is sometimes expressed is whether requiring such texts may hamper the development of young academics’ own voices, to which may be added the concern – expressed in particular by English as a lingua franca scholars – that such tests may not really represent English as it is used in the international arena (UYSL 2014: 318). In our experience, scores on international tests can be a useful indicator of candidates’ levels of proficiency with regard to grammatical and lexical structures, cohesion, and argumentative essay structure. Certainly, here in the Institute we find that it is wise to assume that those students who have scored highly (or highly enough to be admitted to the Institute) but who have not followed a masters course in an Anglophone setting are likely to need more training and support during the thesis-writing process than those who have. This would seem to indicate that being able to write an academic text is also a matter of experience – and this, of course, takes us beyond the layman’s understanding of language proficiency.

Independently of the forces underlying the Institute’s shift in policy, the push towards ensuring higher levels of proficiency has contributed towards reshaping the work that we now do with students, and has allowed us to move towards a firmer mandate as developers of competence in academic practice, rather than as more generic English language teachers. In our experience, this re-conceptualisation (and attendant re-labelling) of our work and of our role within the Institute has been very useful, as it has enabled us to attract all levels of students to work on their written texts – including those at C2 level (CEFR) and native speakers of English.

2. Theoretical underpinnings: pedagogic aims and practices

As mentioned in the Introduction, my colleague and I view our mandate as that of preparing the young multi-lingual scholars at the Institute to become independent and effective participants in their various communities of practice.

Before describing how we strive to do this across the three-year programme, it is useful to point out that the guiding principle we have followed throughout is that of coherence – in the sense that this is described by GOUGH (2014). The programme has been designed to interweave and stage the five different kinds of writing knowledge that HYLAND describes, foregrounding some of these at some points and others at different points: “Content knowledge – the ideas and concepts in the topic area the text will address; System knowledge – the syntax, lexis, appropriate formal conventions needed; Process knowledge – how to prepare and carry out a writing task; Genre knowledge – communicative purposes of the genre and its value in particular contexts; Context knowledge – readers’ expectations, cultural preferences and related texts”
The notion of *constructional alignment* introduced by Biggs (1996) in his seminal paper has also proved useful to give our course designs explanatory rigour: we analyse the tasks that students are required to achieve by the end of each academic year and design our objectives, courses, tasks and learning outcomes around these. Our pedagogic aim is to ensure that the support given to the students in order to fulfil their institutional requirements is adequate, appropriate, and timely (Donnelly/Fitzmaurice 2005). In terms of institutional obligations, first-year PhD students, for example, must, with some departmental variations, write a seminar paper and the first chapter of their thesis by the end of the year; second-year students must deliver two further chapters of their theses by the end of the year, while those in their third year must submit three-quarters of their final dissertation. Because we do not play a role in the assessment of the students’ writing – this stays in the hands of the supervisors in the departments, we are in a position to be able to provide formative feedback on these texts, which we accomplish by means of a ‘correction service’. In the first year, as mentioned above, seminar papers are required, as are first chapters of the thesis. Students have the option to present some pages of these assignments to us for a close correction, which – if taken up – is followed up by a feedback session in which we discuss any problem areas that have emerged, as well as the researcher’s future writing plans. In the *modus vivendi* of the Institute, then, our teaching is framed in terms of support.

Our teaching is thus informed and developed by means of a dual perspective to writing in the Academy, one that dovetails to a considerable extent with the principles put forward by Harwood/Hadley in their discussion of different approaches to the teaching of academic writing (Harwood/Hadley 2004). In their article, they argue for the blending of what they call ‘pragmatic EAP’ (defined as concerning itself with teaching students a “set of dominant academic discourse norms, i.e. the Anglo-American type” (Harwood/Hadley ibid: 356)) with ‘critical EAP’, which rejects the view that language use can be value-free and which critiques pragmatic EAP for imposing hegemonic modes of discourse on students’ own discursive practices. The authors in question claim that the benefits of these two approaches can be brought together in what they call the *Critical Pragmatic Approach*, which explicitly recognises the stylistic differences that exist in the Academy, giving them pedagogic space, while accepting that for instrumental purposes students need to master the dominant norms, or conventions, in order to gain access to the main forums for publishing.

Our own experience resonates with the description of the dilemmas facing EAP practitioners outlined by Harwood/Hadley. It was as a result of the limitations we experienced with a traditional EAP approach that we began to increasingly structure our offerings around Lillis’ concept of ‘critical socialisation’ (Lillis 2003: 194). In doing so we found ourselves increasingly led away from a traditional version of EAP focusing on conforming to type, to one in which students are encouraged to observe and reflect on the kinds of writing taking place in their disciplines and to experiment in their own writing with these ways of doing things. One very practical result of this has been the reorganisation of our courses along disciplinary lines so that the students can...
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start to notice the similarities between ways of doing things in their fields. This focus on the similarities – and, by implication, the differences – between disciplinary practices can come as quite a surprise to those students with whom we work more closely during the first year: these students are usually less confident and proficient in their mastery of English writing and language skills, and often arrive at the Institute with a view of language as something that is ‘homogenous’ and can be taught and mastered unproblematically, a view that has often been induced by previous (EAP) teachers and lecturers (HARWOOD/HADLEY ibid: 356). Part of our role is to expose this belief as unrealistic and impractical: to convince incoming students that what they need to know is how to position themselves ‘academically’ through their writing, as it is this position that will render them credible as scholars.

3. From critical socialisation to academic practice

In this section, I describe the offerings that my colleague and I have developed for the three-year programme. The division of the sections reflects the aims underpinning the programme.

3.1 Pre-sessional offerings for incoming doctoral students

In the first pre-sessional month of September at the Institute, a month traditionally dedicated to language courses, students start work on their academic writing (together with their academic presentation skills). Those who come in at B2+/C1- level (CEFR) attend a mixed disciplinary course that introduces them, amongst other things, to the idea of writing for an audience, varieties of organisational patterns, and paragraphing while also revising verbs and tenses, relative clauses and techniques for maintaining the textual flow of ideas. Course participants also choose a research article written in English in their field by either (an) Anglophone or non-Anglophone writer(s) in order to see how the rhetorical and linguistic issues that are investigated in class play out in published texts. Participants in the next level up are grouped according to discipline; here, courses are taught on a less intensive basis, and the main pedagogic emphasis is placed on developing the twin notions of identity and voice in their writing through examining areas such as the use of ‘I’ and ‘we’, evaluative adverbs, etc. (ANDERSON/HARGREAVES/OWTRAM 2009). In the courses at this level, students are also encouraged to use a research article relating to their own fields of specialisation in order to investigate the various topics that the instructors select for them to study.

Learners coming in at the highest level – around C2 – also work in disciplinary-specific groups. On the basis of a needs analysis carried out with the assistance of the teacher, each group draws up a curriculum that covers the specific requests of the groups. This approach to the teaching of writing assumes that the better writers the stu-

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4 The syllabus was initially closely based on CURRY (2006).
students are, the more aware they will be of their own needs. At the end of this month, students at all three levels are asked to submit a critical analysis of a research article.

3.2 First year: critical socialisation

The work on academic writing for first-year students is organised into courses for discipline-specific groups, which run for approximately six months, starting in October each year together with the onset of departmental seminars. The structure and contents of these courses might be defined as traditional in the sense that the meetings are regular—one one-and-a-half hour session per week—with tasks for homework. The reason that we maintain this structure despite the students’ heavy first-year seminar workload in all three departments is because this short but systematic focus on disciplinary rhetorical practices and language structures allows us to teach the students ways of doing things in their disciplines that are essential for them to master if they are to pass the first year successfully. It also functions as a useful transitional format: behaving like the teacher-figures with whom students are familiar helps to instil confidence in the learning procedure (BAXTER MAGOLDA 2004). We teach a mixture of research article structures, e.g. introductions, conclusions (SWALES/FEAK 1994, 2004), but we also look at areas that are particularly useful for each discipline. For example, in the classes for political and social scientists, we examine the notion of research puzzles, as well as revising structures for writing hypotheses and formulating research questions. In history, instead, we examine narrative texts from history research articles, often supplied by faculty members, to see how stories and events are structured and recounted. Clearly, these kinds of textual features call for accurate language use, and so provide a focus for classwork.

In order to teach these topics and rhetorical features, we find ourselves designing a large number of materials and tasks. We do this partly in order to provide materials that are genuinely interesting and stimulating for each specific group, and partly in order to vary the tasks that are used in class in order to stimulate different types of learning. For example, a favourite task for teaching the importance of producing a cohesive text is, of course, the classic group work activity in which students are asked to put sentences cut into strips together and to motivate their choices to each other in small groups. A further aspect of the work undertaken in the first-year groups focuses explicitly on the actual writing process. As HYLAND points out: “Composing is non-linear and goal-driven. Therefore students may benefit from having a range of planning, writing and revising strategies to draw on” (HYLAND 2011: 31). We draw extensively on EFL methodology to stimulate learning through enjoyable experiences. In practice, this involves introducing variation in the use of classroom space and layout, rearranging desks and tables, for example, in order to diversify the learning experience. In this sense, then, we promote the idea of a learner-centred classroom, in which the teacher is the organiser of the various tasks undertaken.

For those students who have been exempted from following first-year courses due to their very expert academic writing skills, we offer individual and small group tutori-
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alos to discuss any problems that might emerge. These students are also offered the opportunity to have their papers corrected, plus a feedback session, to see what is going on in their writing. Even for students with very strong language skills – and, indeed, for native speakers of English – we find this sort of support essential. One of the main reasons for this is that it helps to counter the effects of working in a multi-lingual environment, in which unintentional syntactic and lexical transfer between languages that are being used concurrently for academic purposes is not uncommon.

3.3 Second and third years: fostering critical autonomy

At the beginning of this paper, I presented the teaching-learning process around which we have designed our first year offerings as ‘critical socialisation’, a process in which the learners are encouraged to examine the practices of the scholars in their fields, and to use these powers of observation to hone their own writing. In the second and third years of the students’ stay at the Institute, we deliberately shift our offerings to a more independent form of learning – that of academic writers’ groups. We first started offering these groups to third- and fourth-year students about six years ago, with the explicit aim of supporting them in their writing as they approached the final stages of their thesis writing. Inspired by the work of Murray/Moore (2006: 109-127), we began to offer sessions to small groups of students in the same discipline or neighbouring disciplines – usually no more than five, meeting on a regular basis in order to have them read and critique each other’s work in progress. Before each session, short segments of written text (e.g. introductions to chapters, commentary on tables, literature reviews, etc.) are circulated by participants to all members of the group. The group includes a facilitator (in our setting, one of the teachers), whose role is to chair discussions, to prompt group members to articulate their observations in a focused way, and to promote a problem-solving approach to removing writing barriers.

In a typical session (usually one-and-a-half hours), each piece of writing circulated is discussed in turn. The writer first briefs his/her peers by indicating what stage the writing is at (e.g. first draft, first revision, about to be sent to supervisor), what kind of feedback he/she feels would be useful, and if there are any specific parts of the text that he/she would particularly like the group to focus on. The group then provides feedback to the writer. After discussing the various texts, there is usually a round of de-briefing in which the writers identify which points they have found most useful and how they intend to use their colleagues’ observations in revising their work. At the end of each session, the group decides on their objectives and work plan for the following session. There are several advantages to this mode of work in the later stages of the doctoral process: it fosters writer autonomy while providing pedagogic support and expertise; it improves the clarity and readability of drafts to be presented to supervisors and thesis-related conference presentations and articles; it helps to involve all the readers in the group, by getting them to reflect on their institutional setting and its needs; finally, it provides a structured opportunity to give and receive peer feedback, a practice of formative value for the following stages of an academic career.
About three years ago, we decided to extend this format to the second year, in which, as previously mentioned, students are required to submit a further two chapters to their supervisors. We view the work done in the second-year academic writing groups as a bridge between the more teacher-centred pedagogic approach adopted in the first year and the more autonomous peer-based review in the third – in order to support this belief, we scaffold second-year writing activities by providing focused input on problematic areas and/or readings on different areas of academic writing. For example, we often find ourselves focusing on the ways in which punctuation can be used to enhance the communicative quality of a text, particularly through the use of the comma and the semi-colon. This kind of work often leads to discussion about whether these uses are bound by rules or whether they can be implemented as a result of personal preferences. The uses of tenses in text are another area that often requires detailed work as well as some further observation of how writers use them in their academic writings. Sometimes we give the participants readings to do at home – typical topics include the structuring of paragraphs and the effects of using passive forms as compared to active structures. The procedures are thus quite similar to those used with the third-year groups but our role as teachers is slightly less that of a facilitator and encompasses the traditional role of teacher, who individuates areas of difficulty or interest and provides materials on which the students work.

The title of this article makes reference to the notion of stylistics as a tool for raising awareness of different styles of writing – and thus for fostering different ways of doing things by alternating between the lens of both community and individual practices. I have already promoted this view elsewhere, arguing that “style is not only a tool by which to understand literary embellishment: it also provides a rigorous yardstick by which to observe the words and structures writers choose in order to produce a specific communicative effect on their readers” (Owtram 2011: 4). Underpinning the pedagogic formats that we offer to the students and the different kinds of knowledge we set out to teach them (Hyland 2011: 31) is a firm conviction that the notion of comparative stylistics can fruitfully contribute to unifying our programmes and our methods, endowing them with a further layer of the coherence mentioned in Section 2. Comparative stylistics provides a unifying lens that allows discourse to be described in terms that help raise students’ awareness of how certain assumptions and communicative effects can be prompted by strategic choices at the grammatical or lexical levels or through particular ways of patterning text at the rhetorical level. Just as importantly in our multi-lingual environment, it also makes it possible to carry out this kind of analysis contrastively across languages.

Learning to observe the texts of others is not, however, sufficient: the same levels of awareness need to be incorporated into the students’ understanding of their own texts and writing process. Offering corrective feedback during the first two years of the programme allows students to gain a critical perspective on their work by discussing, during the follow-up session, different ways of expressing the same ideas and the kinds of communicative effects these different choices create. This focus is further developed in the academic writing and writers’ groups, where, as described above, the responsibility
for this sort of commenting, discussion of assumptions and communicative effects, and reformulation is shifted onto the students themselves. In this process, not only do native and non-native students improve the readability of their texts – they also become more proficient observers and their revised texts gain in accuracy and sophistication (OWTRAM 2011: 4).

4. Conclusion

In this article I have illustrated how our current teaching of doctoral students has been carefully designed to move from an initial focus that is only apparently normative to an overt engagement with a range of issues raised in an academic literacies perspective by academic literacy scholars (LILLIS/SCOTT 2007: 13). I have described the dynamics underlying the decisions made over the last ten years in terms of curriculum and methodology, stressing the interplay between bottom-up choices stemming from our interactions with students and theoretical input from academic literacies scholars and practitioners working in other settings (amongst others BELCHER 2009; GILTROW 2002). In our experience, a curriculum based on a gradual shift from teaching to facilitating, and which introduces a progressively richer and more nuanced view of style, is the most appropriate way to help students refashion their assumptions and expectations about the writing process and to foster a solid ability to write academic texts in English.

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