

Writing in Context: A European Study of Comparative Academic Literacy Practices

Carole Sedgwick

University of Lancaster/University of
Roehampton

Project

To investigate writing for assessment on postgraduate English language majors in two different cultural and linguistic contexts: a university in Hungary and a university in Italy

New Literacy Studies

Literacy practices:

‘...are not just what people do with literacy, but what they make of what they do, the values they place on it and the ideologies that surround it.’ (Baynham, 1995: 1)

Research questions

1. What literacy practices are involved in the production and evaluation of written assignments?
2. What similarities and differences in practices can be identified across the two programmes?

Research questions

3. How do these practices relate to the social and cultural contexts of the programmes?
4. What can be drawn out of the research that would enable students to deal with academic writing practices on a similar academic programme in a different cultural and linguistic setting?

Ethnographic research method

- Ethnography is holistic (not isolating individual factors)
- It studies real subjects in real-life contexts.
- It draws out the ‘insiders’ (emic) perspective.
- It is based on an interpretive process that involves both the researcher’s and the research subject’s perspective on the issues in question.

(Papen, 2005:62)

Italy: assessment period (June, July 2007)

Interviews: students and tutors

Documentation: graded assignments +
drafts, course descriptions, criteria for
assessment

Tutor A: Aims

‘Apart from getting the students to pass the exam, which was obviously an important thing, for me the aim was to get them to examine texts from the point of view of literary criticism or just from a translation point of view and to get them to use some of the terminology of text linguistics without making it too complicated. To understand texts in a different way and then to write something, which is well-organised and well-written.’

Tutor A: continued

Probably the most important thing is writing properly. That they should be able to write fairly academic English. That's the way I've interpreted it anyway.'

Exam

Analyse the following text. Your composition should touch upon the elements of text analysis studied during the course. You may use both a monolingual and a bilingual dictionary. (3 hours)

110 students sat the exam and 60 attended the course

Tutor A: task rubric

‘I always try to keep it the same. The rubric is the same. They know exactly what is going to happen in the exam, but the actual text differs.’

Evaluation of student A's exam text

Reads almost like an educated English person that is well-informed on the subject

Evaluation of student A's exam text

Tutor A

- *Expression good: semi-formal style*
- *Very few grammar mistakes*
- *Introductory paragraph, organised in a readable form and detectable conclusion*
- *First person in conclusion not rest of text ('house style')*

Student A

- *The way we have built our essay, so logical way of saying things*
- *If the register is appropriate to academic writing*
- *If we support our ideas (important), explain factors found in the text.*

Observations on style: Tutors

- I try to make students more aware of the Anglo Saxon approach, clarity and brevity, not purple prose (Tutor A).
- Writing compositions in Italian schools is writing long sentences. In some cases it's fine, but they have to conform to the Anglo Saxon mentality (Tutor A).
- The other thing I concentrate on is to write in complex clauses but not complicated – a straightforward style, writing to be understood rather than writing to be impressive (Tutor A).
- English does have long sentences but they proceed in one direction, whereas Italian sentences can very very often jump backwards and forwards and sideways and if you write like that it's just awful because it sounds like you haven't organised your material before you write. (Tutor D)

Observations on style: Student A

- Maybe in Italian it is typical for an Italian to say things in a complex and long way but in English. I think in English it is more direct. It goes immediately to the core of the discourse and I go always around the mid-point maybe.
- Professor A once wrote me that I think it is (looking at her own work) he wrote sometimes a little long-winded “a little too long”. Yes, I think this is my problem because I think always that the reader or the listener is not very convinced. I do not really show what I am saying, so I am always like a ‘hummer’, always saying the same thing.

Practice and context

- The course
- The programme
- The national university context
- The school context
- The linguistic context

The aim of my research is not the
“generation of decontextualised principles
or generalisations at an abstract level but the
derivation of principles and theoretical
insights within particularity”
(Street, 1993:86)