Reading and Writing at University – raising genre awareness as initiation into a discourse community

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1.0 Introduction

The theoretical concepts of 'genre' and 'discourse community' will be drawn on in this paper to evolve a theoretical model that we hope to apply to the context of academic writing and to attainment at third level. Genre is a much talked about and less frequently used notion across a wide range of research and it has been criticised for offering a model that is not easy to operationalise (cf. Hasan 1992; McCarthy 2000). Latterly, the work of Swales has looked at genre in the context of 'discourse communities' offering a more socially-constructed basis for genre (see Swales 1988; 1990 and Askehave and Swales, 2001). For our purposes, the synthesis of the notions of genre and discourse communities offers a useful theoretical framework for our empirical research into the linguistic barriers posed by the academic institutional norms of the genre of writing required at university level. Essentially, we attempt to explore the discourse community of 'academia' within which, we propose, a certain linguistic level of competence is required in order to achieve high grades in essays and exams. We investigate the hypothesis that successful students are those who have intuited and mastered the generic norms of academic discourse and conversely, those who underachieve at third level are those who have not assimilated the norms in this discourse community. In this paper we will detail some of these 'norms' and, using student essay samples, we will explore the connection between essay grades and conformity to these norms.

In an empirical study of pass grade essays, O'Keeffe (2000) has identified deficiencies in terms of syntax, lexis and style. She points out that in addition to writing skills, students 'also need to become accustomed to the "culture" of this genre of writing. Some students intuitively sense this "culture", picking up implicit tacit knowledge as they progress but … some do not' (p167). Part of this 'culture' that students are expected to become part of involves the mastery of the required register, or the relationship between language features and their context (McCarthy 1998). In academic writing, the level of language is formal and certain lexical items and syntactic structures are more frequently used (see Carter and McCarthy, 1997; Biber et al, 1999). The expected formality of academic writing limits the student in terms of the words, expressions, and structures appropriate for use. In addition, students are limited by the expectations of the particular discipline in which the student is writing. Barrass (1995) states that many students perform below their ability not because of low motivation or lack of effort, but because they do not pay

enough attention to improving their competence in communicating their thoughts through writing. We make the case that the ability to replicate the communicative norms of the individual discipline is central to this competence.

2.0 Genre

The concept of 'genre' is often written about and has been defined in different ways, for different purposes, not surprisingly, therefore, it has been referred to as a 'fuzzy concept' (Swales 1990: 33). We define 'genres' within this paper as collaboratively constructed and socially-ratified prototypes of interaction in speech and writing. This definition puts forward a socially rooted model, where any interaction in speech and writing is subject to generic behaviour. Let us take an example from everyday: when buying something over a counter in a shop, we orient our behaviour towards socially-expected norms for that interaction. These norms can vary across cultures and are relative to social conditions of the interaction, such as the speaker relationship[1] and context, giving rise to 'register variation' (see Biber 1988 and Biber 1995). In writing, the case is similar, for example when writing a letter, one conforms to the social expectations in a given context, giving rise to the lexical and structural difference between a personal and a business letter and so on. As social beings it is in our interest to abstract schematic or prototypical structures from most recurring human interactions so that to have precedents for interaction rather than having to face each new encounter, in writing or in speaking, as novel, unfolding and without recognisable structure to orient towards.

3.0 Discourse Community

Genre analyst, John Swales discusses and refines the notion of *discourse communities*, which he distinguishes from *speech communities* (see Swales 1988). Speech communities are centripetal (they pull people in), while discourse communities are centrifugal (they set people, or parts of people, apart) (Swales 1988: 212). A *discourse community*, apart from comprising defining components such as commonality of interest, public goals, purposeful interchange of information and feedback, also has a *forum*. *Fora* can consist of bulletins, meetings, conferences, telephones calls, emails and websites and so on. Via these fora, *discourse communities* develop and continue to develop *discourse expectations*: 'these may involve the appropriacy of topics, the form, function and positioning of discoursal elements' (Swales 1988: 212). These discoursal expectations, according to Swales, *create* the genres that articulate the operations of the *discourse community*. Essentially, he sees the resultant genres as properties of *discourse communities* and, as such, they serve as social binding agents to hold together a critical mass of members, via a forum or fora. To draw again on the Newtonian metaphor, we can say that the centripetal force of academic discourse sets it apart from everyday discourses and we posit that the generic writing and speaking norms that have evolved over the centuries in academia (i.e. the fora) need to be intuited in order to succeed third level.

4.0 Typical features

1 Binchy (2000) provides a detailed empirical study of shop encounters in an Irish context

Let us now turn to some of the practicalities of the discourse community of academia. Student essays can be viewed in terms of style and structure (see Brosnan et al, 2000), both of which can be intuited to varying degrees from the language encountered by the student while partaking in the discourse community. Here we concentrate on style but it should be noted that structure also seems to affect the successful writing of an essay.

4.1 Data

The data comprises eight first year History essays from a third-level institution, four of which received a grade A and four of which received a lower grade C. We have also selected for analysis three extracts from three books listed on all eight bibliographical references[2]. Each extract consists of roughly 750 words and is taken from the first chapter of each book.

4.2 Methodology

We identify generic stylistic features of lexis (vocabulary), clausal complexity and stance marking from the three referenced academic texts. We then compare and contrast the A grade and C grade essays in terms of their level of conformity these linguistic features.

4.3 Analysis

4.3.1 Lexis

Academic writing is typically associated with a formal vocabulary, often using a multi-syllabic lexis of Greco-Latin origin (Coursan 1985) which we would not expect to find in everyday spoken language and therefore would not be familiar to those who have not encountered similar genres before. While the lack of familiarity with the meaning and grammar of such words may make reading and comprehension awkward for the student not fully initiated into the discourse community (Donley and Reppen, 2001), it certainly makes reproducing a similar lexis in their own work very difficult.

In the extracts from the referenced texts, some words of Greco-Latin origin occur which can be considered uncommon in everyday speech:

propagation (T1)
instigation (T1)
partisan (T1)
morphology (T2)
eponymous (T3)
genealogically (T3)

These words are not explained in the text, nor is their meaning clarified which gives rise to our assumption that they are not part of the core vocabulary of the subject, and that the

2 The three texts are referred to as T1, T2, and T3 throughout this paper.

writer assumes that they are understood. Analysis of the A grade essays revealed a number of such multi-syllabic Greco-Latin low frequency lexical items:

depredations
rudimentary
fundamental
misinterpretation
facets

The use of such words in not evident in the low C essay corpus. Instead we find language patterns that are more akin to spoken language genres (see O'Keeffe 2000, who also finds evidence of this in her data):

The inequalities **go** as follows: ...

We also find that the C essays have more high frequency synonyms for the words chosen by the grade A students, for example, 'basic' is used 4 times by the C grade students, and this equates with 'rudimentary' and 'fundamental' in the A grade essays.

Overall there is a higher occurrence of multi-syllabic Greco-Latin low frequency lexical items in the A grade essays than in the C grade essays. The A grade essays conform more to the generic lexical norms of academic writing in History, as found in the referenced texts. This evinces that already, in first year, the A grade students have begun to assimilate the generic norms of the discipline while the lower C grade student batch have neither assimilated nor reproduced such generic norms.

4.3.2 Clausal complexity

Clausal complexity is a feature of academic writing that is used to clarify meaning and add more information (Biber, 1988). Although not every sentence in the referenced texts has clausal complexity, some examples are present. One such example is shown in extract 1 below:

Extract 1
"Outside influences which reached Ireland were, on the one hand, absorbed and digested, while the Irish culture, on the other hand, influenced its immediate neighbours even more than it did the other peoples of Europe." (T2)

In this extract, we can see how two ideas are integrated into one sentence by 'on the one hand ... on the other hand' with 'while' to reinforce the contrast between the ideas. Such complexity is common in the extracts from referenced texts. If the student essays were to mirror the generic norms of academic writing in history, there should be some sort of clausal complexity within the texts produced by the students.

In the essays of the A essays, syntactic complexity is evident in some sentences:

Extract 2
"Their raids destroyed many of the workshops where this work was done, and also forced the monks to pursue their art in stone rather than metal, so that the Vikings would be uninterested in and unable to the works."

When syntactic complexity is attempted in the C grade essays, instead of making the idea clearer and adding relevant information, it confuses the reader:

Extract 3
"In every marriage despite the amount of wealth a woman has contributed she has a certain hold over her husband with regards food, clothing, cattle or sheep or anything that could endanger him not protecting her properly."

On quantifying the instances of two common coordinating conjunctions, 'and' and 'but', in both the A and C grade essays we found the following results[3]:

Table 1 Conjunctions in Student essays per 1000 words

Conjunction	C grade	A grade	Text
And	4.75	16.5	16.4
But	1.25	4	4

It becomes obvious from this table that the A grade essays contain over three times more multi-clausal sentences using 'and' and 'but' than the C grade essays. Furthermore, the pattern in the A grade essays is very similar to the pattern found in the referenced text extracts. However, it must be noted that the practice of using relative pronouns in the text extracts to add more information, for example 'Our information about the Hellenistic world, which was continued in many respects in the Roman Empire, comes just as ..', is reproduced in neither the A nor C grade essays.

4.3.3 Stance Marking

Writers have a choice as to marking their attitude towards what they write, for example a writer can downtone the strength of an assertion so as not to appear two forceful and to allow for other opinions. Marking stance is a common feature of academic texts and here we are looking at three ways in which a writer can give an attitudinal judgement towards their writing: modal adverbs, modal verbs and stanced reporting (see Biber et al 1999).

4.3.3.1 Modal adverbs
The use of modal adverbs is a prevalent way of downtoning assertions. The serve to create a degree of modesty when making assertions and allow for the possibility of being contradicted. In the referenced texts, downtoning with the use of modal adverbs is evident:

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3 We only counted those conjunctions that joined clauses and excluded those that joined simple phrases, for example, 'The Vikings had positive and negative effects' was not counted.

... a very large minority, **perhaps** even half the population ... (T1)
... it was most **probably** a ... (T2)
... it is **likely** that ... (T3)

The use of modal adverbs to mark the assertions of the writer can be seen in the A grade essays:
... it seems that **maybe** ...
... and **perhaps** rightly so ...

In the C grade essays, modal adverbs are not common.

4.3.3.2 Modal verbs
Modal verbs are used with a similar effect to modal adverbs in the referenced texts:

If we **may** trust a text ... (T2)
So much **seems** clear ... (T1)

Again, this use of modal verbs is replicated in the A grade essays:

The lesson **seems** to have been well learned ...
It **seems** that the more we ...

As we can see above, the authors of the A grade essays tend to downtone their own assertions or deductions through the use of modal verbs and modal adverbs and this corresponds to the generic norms evident in the referenced texts. In the C grade essays, there are notably fewer instances of downtoning with a modal verb:

Richtor in his overall view **seems** to think that the vikings had many posative (sic) effects on Irish society.

However the views of Professor Binchy **may** have been slightly exaggerated 'I am convinced that the coming ...'

In the two examples above, not only are the assertions being downtoned not similar in type to those in the texts and A grade essays, but they also serve to indicate to the corrector that the student is not completely comfortable with the text being quoted. It is unclear whether the students are using 'seems' and 'may' because they have intuited from their encounter with the genre that downtoning should be used but not yet assimilated standard use, or whether it is simply because they are not sure of the message of the text in question. It is also possible that in the second example the student is attempting to refute the conclusions of one commentator but does not have the generic know-how to provide an opposing idea or a quote that contradicts the view of the Professor in question.

In the C grade essays, we see another instance of using modal verbs to downtone an assertion:

Reticence, virtue and industry **seemed** to be the qualities most admired in a woman.

Here, the writer is giving a personal opinion based on some facts that they have already laid out in the essay. However, the choice of tense is not suitable; 'seemed' is past simple and therefore refers to an assertion in the past. This should be referring to a present assertion about the past i.e. the phrase should read 'seem to have been'.

4.3.3.3 Reporting Verbs and Reporting Phrases

Quoting and paraphrasing what authors have written is a core requirement within the norms of a third level essay, and so, reporting phrases should commonly be used. Table 2 presents a quantitative analysis across the datasets:

Table 2 Reporting verbs and reporting phrases

	Reporting verb/phrase per 1000 words
Referenced texts	4
A grade essays	2.25
C grade essays	3.25

From table 2, it seems that the C grade essays are closer to the referenced texts with regard to the frequency of reporting verbs than the A grade essays. However, this can be misleading as a closer examination reveals.

92% of the reporting verbs in the C grade essays occur in the same essay which has the effect of making the essay seem like a list of reports of what others have said and thus eliminates the views of the writer. Furthermore, 30% of the reporting verbs are a derivative of 'say', a neutral reporting verb, and therefore do not mark the stance of the writer, but instead serve to reinforce the effect of a list of reports without comment. In addition, two of the C grade essays have no reporting whatsoever which would immediately suggest to the corrector that they have not researched the topic. In contrast, the frequency of reporting in the A grade essays is distributed more. In the A grade essays, stanced verbs such as 'derides' and 'feels' are used to convey to the corrector that the writer has an opinion on the material. This adheres to the generic norms of the discipline as verbs such as 'believe' and 'indicate' are used in the referenced texts.

5.0 Conclusion

In the mirco-analysis of the three sets of data: A and C grade essays and three core texts, we have looked quantitatively at lexis, clausal complexity and stance marking. In each area we noted that the high grade essays conformed to the generic norms of style found in the core text extracts. In the low C essays, we found that this was not the case. This adds weight to our assertion that there is a link between attainment in essays and the level of genre awareness of the writer within a given discourse community. Consequently, we point to the need for third level institutions to provide formative intervention within first

year programmes to help initiate undergraduates into the discourse community of academia.

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