



# DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LITERACY

George Blue (ed.)

Peter Lang

Academic literacy has always been a key underlying theme in English for academic purposes and practitioners and researchers in the field have always had one eye on its development in students. In recent years it has moved into the foreground and become a central field of study in its own right and the focus of a considerable amount of programme development and research. This was reflected in the fact that a conference focusing on Developing Academic Literacy was held by BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes) in Southampton in the spring of 2003. This volume consists of papers selected from the themes of that conference. The papers reflect areas of interest in issues in academic literacy, criticality and evaluative language, academic literacy in the disciplines and the use of technology in developing academic literacy.

George Blue was a Senior Lecturer and Head of Education in Modern Languages at the University of Southampton. He was the University's first Lecturer in English for Overseas Students and served as Head of the English Language Section for many years, helping to establish Southampton as a major centre for English for Academic Purposes (EAP). He was a former Chair of the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP) and of the Institute for English Language Teacher Development in Higher Education (IELTDHE).



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## *George Blue*

Tragically, George died in November 2009, after a major operation and a short illness. The last professional task he undertook was to submit the manuscript of this book to the publishers before his operation, having completed the editorial work with his characteristic meticulousness and attention to detail. His many friends and colleagues miss him greatly and we all regret that he was not able to see this book in its published form, but it will stand as a fitting tribute to his scholarship, professionalism and dedication.

TO THE MEMORY OF

## *Christopher Brumfit*

A dear friend and colleague, whose untimely death in March 2006 robbed our profession of one of its greatest thinkers and most dedicated and distinguished leaders. We are proud to include his paper, which was originally given as a plenary presentation at the 2003 BALEAP conference, in this collection.





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GEORGE BLUE

## Developing Academic Literacy: Introduction

### Introduction

Literacy has always been an important theme in education, but in recent years it has been the focus of a great deal of attention. Traditionally, literacy has been seen as uniting the skills of reading and writing (two of the three Rs). In mother tongue teaching in schools it is also seen as involving speaking and listening, which feed into and complement skills in handling the written word, especially in the early years.

One of the important goals of primary education is to help pupils to read and write with confidence, fluency and understanding. This obviously goes beyond the word level and involves dealing with a variety of different text types with different patterns of organisation and different purposes. Where appropriate, literacy teaching may be linked to work in other curriculum areas, e.g. retrieving information from texts used in science, studying stories linked to a topic in history. Thus, in some ways literacy goes beyond developing skills in reading and writing, although there is always a focus on these skills.

When we come to consider academic literacy, we might expect to find a similar major (but not exclusive) focus on reading and writing. Reading of course normally takes place silently, and we would not expect to find the focus on reading aloud that is common in the early years curriculum. Writing will need to be accurate, coherent, well structured, in the correct register, with appropriate vocabulary, etc.

According to Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, however, the term 'academic literacy' has come to be applied to 'the complex set of skills (not necessarily only those relating to the mastery of reading and writing) which

are increasingly argued to be vital underpinnings or cultural knowledge required for success in academic communities ...' (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons 2002: 4).

This calls to mind other kinds of 'literacy' (e.g. technological literacy, media literacy, emotional literacy, political literacy, etc.), where the focus is more on an ability to interpret and express oneself appropriately than on the written word. Understood in this way, academic literacy will include language skills at a quite sophisticated level, including an understanding of and ability to use appropriate disciplinary discourse. It will also involve a degree of autonomy, which is normally expected in academic work. It will necessitate an understanding of academic integrity and the dangers of plagiarism. Finally, there will be a willingness to question the views of others and to evaluate research, whether one's own or that of others. The degree to which criticality is valued varies from discipline to discipline, but it is seen by many as an essential component of academic literacy. There is a widely held belief that graduates should be autonomous, critical thinkers, but there is less agreement about the nature of 'criticality', and how it develops during the course of a university education. This will be explored in some of the papers in this collection.

Braine has sought to broaden the scope of academic literacy in slightly different ways:

... graduate students not only need to build interactive relationships with their teachers, thesis supervisors, and peers, and develop effective research strategies and good writing skills, they also need to adapt smoothly to the linguistic and social milieu of their host environment and to the culture of their academic departments and institutions.

Simply stated, a knowledge of one's chosen field of study, research skills, and good reading and writing skills form only the foundation for the acquisition of academic literacy. To build upon this foundation, graduate students must adapt quickly to both the academic and social culture of their host environments, and the personalities and demands of their teachers, academic supervisors, and classmates. Graduate students need to acquire advanced academic literacy, and this acquisition only comes, whether these students like it or not, along with complex and often confusing baggage.

(Braine 2002: 60)

## The papers in this volume

These papers are a selection from the BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes) conference held in Southampton in the spring of 2003 with the title *Developing Academic Literacy*. Although a long time has elapsed between the conference and the publication of this collection (for which the editor humbly apologises), the papers have all stood the test of time. Some of the chapters report on particular work in a local context, while others are more general in scope. All of them, though, are of relevance to different contexts and should inform thinking and good practice more generally. Although there is a great deal of overlap between sections, and some of the papers could have been included in more than one section, the papers have been divided into four sections under the headings: Issues in academic literacy; Criticality and evaluative language; Academic literacy in the disciplines; and The use of technology in developing academic literacy.

### *Issues in academic literacy*

The first four chapters raise a number of important issues in the area of academic literacy. The first two are more abstract or theoretical in scope, whilst the last two focus more practically on 'proofreading' and academic vocabulary.

*Christopher Brumfit's* paper helps to set the scene for this collection. He broadens the scope of academic literacy by considering a number of different types of literacy, or 'literacies', going beyond the linguistic to other forms of 'interpretation' (media literacy, political literacy, ...) which are increasingly necessary in a rapidly changing world. As ever, he encourages us to question the status quo and to engage with some of the ways in which life has changed in the last few years for both students and academics, and the implications that these changes have for our construction of academic literacy.

*Siân Preece* discusses three different approaches to academic literacy, or three different ‘discourses’ that underpin it: the discourse of socialisation, the discourse of skills and the discourse of literacies (or literacy practices). Socialisation, until now the dominant discourse in EAP, is concerned with helping students to acculturate into the new culture, so that they can ‘reproduce the dominant literacy practices in their subject’. She argues that this requirement to conform to HE norms and values may be alienating for some students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds. The discourse of skills, likewise, views some students as being in need of ‘remedial’ help, which can serve to devalue and, in some cases, alienate them. On the other hand, the discourse of literacies, which suggests that there are ‘multiple and multilingual literacy practices’, recognises that students may have ‘more or less expertise in a range of literacy practices’. This, she suggests, values what students bring with them, recognises the complexity of literacy practices and may even enhance the status of EAP practitioners.

*Joan Turner* addresses the issue of ‘proofreading’, which is a matter of growing concern among EAP practitioners. She shows how the scope of the term has been extended from the final checking of a text for typographical and other surface errors to dealing with much ‘broader issues of textual organisation’. She argues that, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, ‘the ability to manipulate and control language is a crucial part of *doing* the writing’. Using extracts from students’ work she illustrates the difficulty of mere proofreading and the danger of doing very much more than this, which raises ethical questions around who is ultimately doing the writing.

*John Straker* focuses on academic vocabulary in the coursework of international students. He compares the use of words from the academic word list (AWL) in the coursework of native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) students, looking at both percentage use and variety of use (as opposed to repetition of the same AWL words). He then goes on to look at one student’s use of AWL vocabulary over a two-year period, following this with a more in-depth investigation into her use of anaphoric nouns. It becomes clear that, although the AWL can be a very useful tool, applying it in the EAP classroom is not entirely straightforward.



*Criticality and evaluative language*

The next four papers deal with critical thinking skills as a key concept of academic literacy, and ways in which students can be helped to adopt a more evaluative approach in their work.

*Fiona Cotton's* paper is concerned with the way critical thinking skills are manifested through evaluative language use. She examines and compares the use of modal verbs, evaluative adjectives, adverbs and verbs, conditionals and comparatives by NS and NNS students, concluding that NS students make considerably more use of these structures than their NNS counterparts. She then looks at the Appraisal Framework (Martin 1995, 2000; White 2001) and concludes that NNS students use slightly more 'Judgement' language than NS students, though both use far less than expert writers. 'Appreciation' language was largely absent from student writing. On the other hand, whilst NNS students used very little 'Affect' language, for NS students this was the preferred form of 'Judgement' language. Interestingly, the NNS model was closer to that of expert writers in this case.

*Bill Guariento and Esther Daborn* are interested in the way in which students give opinions. They make use of the Glasgow Academic Corpus to look at the use of the first person pronoun 'I', and show how it is used quite widely in certain disciplines, but hardly at all in others, particularly for structuring the text and giving an opinion. They then look at other forms of evaluative language, using authentic articles as models, and describe how they help students to develop this more impersonal evaluative language in their own writing.

*Diana Ridley* describes her work on the PhD literature review. Starting with a survey of 50 PhD theses she investigates the variation that exists, often related to subject area, in the way the literature is dealt with. In some fields there may be one or more chapters dedicated to reviewing previous research, whilst in others discussion of the literature may be interspersed throughout the thesis. She then describes four longitudinal case studies that she carried out with international research students preparing their transfer reports for upgrading from MPhil to PhD registration. Four significant issues that helped to frame her research were *multiple purposes, integration*

*of sources, criticality and visibility of writer voice.* She illustrates the first of these themes with data from one of the case studies, but argues that all four are important for research students to apply to their own work. In many cases, she argues, it will be helpful to make these themes explicit and to formulate the meta-language that will enable students to engage with the literacy practices of their disciplines.

*Julia Jeannet and Clare Wright* are concerned with developing the academic literacy skills of students on an international foundation level programme. In the first half of the semester they aim to develop language and study skills through practice on theme-related materials. In the second half of the semester they focus on applying these skills, in a closely supervised manner, to the creation of a term paper. Throughout the semester they encourage students to develop their linguistic confidence, evaluative thinking and academic autonomy. The term paper is prepared through a 'scaffolding' process in which students go through a series of clearly defined stages with support and supervision from their lecturers. This clearly structured learning environment seems to produce very positive results, and informal feedback also suggests that the programme is well suited to students at this level.

### *Academic literacy in the disciplines*

The next three papers describe academic literacy work in mathematics, science and engineering. The second paper describes how a mixed discipline approach can inform students' work in their disciplines.

*Bill Barton and Pip Neville-Barton* investigate aspects of academic literacy in a particular discipline: mathematics. They compare NS and NNS students, looking at their ability to understand and answer text-based and non-text-based questions (using symbols, diagrams and graphs). They conclude, very interestingly, that where questions are understood NS and NNS perform very similarly. However, NNS students have more difficulty in understanding questions written in general English text and even more difficulty with questions written in technical (mathematical) text, which results in a significantly lower performance overall.

*Steve Marshall and Simon Williams* have developed an interesting approach to teaching a graduate EAP writing course ‘outside of the disciplines’. In this approach, in which they teach groups of postgraduate students from a mixture of disciplines, they have combined aspects of product, process and genre approaches, arguing that to exclude any of the three could disadvantage some students and that, depending on their writing experience and expertise, students may benefit from paying more or less attention to each of the three. They illustrate how this synthesis works with reference to a particular academic writing programme that they have developed: a diagnostic, individualised approach in which students both bring in writing from their discipline and apply generic concepts learnt to practices in their specific discipline.

*Julie Hartill and David Lefevre* describe their use of authentic inhouse web-based materials to develop the academic literacy skills of students of science and engineering. They discuss the limitations of large corpora such as the BNC and the increasing availability of suitable texts on the Internet which can very easily be used to create different corpora to meet the needs of their students. Their feedback from students indicates that there is little interest in studying printouts of concordance lines, showing fragments of sentences. However, using longer extracts from source texts has proved to be very motivating and has high face validity, as these texts have been generated within the institution. They believe that their Corpus Builder tool enables them to identify suitable texts and create teaching materials that can be used to develop students’ literacy skills in an EAP context.

### *The use of technology in developing academic literacy*

We have already come across the use of technology in a number of papers, but the four papers in this section demonstrate a particular commitment to using technology for pedagogic or research purposes.

*Karen Nicholls* discusses the challenge that ‘essayist literacy’ (a concept based on Gee’s work; see Lillis 1999: 131) can present to students from ‘widening participation’ backgrounds, including international students. In response to this she has developed an online resource as a reference tool

where these students can find help in developing their academic literacy skills. She describes how the site was assessed for accessibility and usability, and the changes that were made as a result of these tests. Finally, she comments on the need for a wider range of resources to enable students from all backgrounds to find the information and advice they need in developing their academic literacy skills.

*Lynn Errey* is interested in the development of learner autonomy as an important aspect of EAP. She describes an experiment using weekly weblogs, in which EAP students posted their logbook entries to a discussion page in a virtual learning environment. Through these 'self-reflections' and through their interaction with both other students and the teacher, students were able to reflect on their learning processes and to identify their strengths and their on-going needs.

*Alasdair Archibald* is interested in the composing processes that students go through in their writing. He looks at the kinds of revisions that students make to their texts when writing in their first and (very advanced level) second language. Although there was some evidence of focusing more on sentence level accuracy in the L2, for most students in the sample the expression of personality and voice (in both L1 and L2) assumed more importance in their revisions. In most cases, therefore, the composition processes used by these students with a high level of proficiency in their L2 were very similar in their L1 and L2, which suggests that their academic literacy skills in their L2 are highly developed.

Recognising the importance of vocabulary in the development of academic literacy, *Hilary Nesi* turns her attention to students' dictionary-using habits and preferences. She investigates the potential of a monolingual learners' dictionary on CD-ROM for compiling autonomous word lists, and compares this with Chinese bilingual dictionary software and with bilingual pocket electronic dictionaries (PEDs). Among the students surveyed, most of whom (26/32) were Chinese, she found a strong preference for bilingual dictionaries over monolingual and a preference for e-dictionaries over those in book form. Although students acknowledged the academic superiority and 'usefulness' of the monolingual learners' dictionary, they preferred the convenience or 'usability' of the PEDs and of

the Chinese bilingual dictionary software. This presents quite a challenge for e-dictionaries of the future.

## Conclusion

This collection looks at academic literacy from a number of different perspectives and explores a number of issues that are central to the field. Not all of the contributors prioritise language work, but a number of papers do focus on academic reading and writing. Given the amount of reading that is expected of many students and the fact that they are assessed primarily on the basis of what they write, this is unsurprising. Many of the papers go beyond these basic literacy skills to include topics such as academic vocabulary, academic autonomy and criticality, and these are clearly areas that are very important to our students and that can therefore rightly be considered to be part of academic literacy.

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PART I

Issues in Academic Literacy





CHRISTOPHER BRUMFIT

## Literacy or Literacies? Academic Identities in a Language-Sharing World

### Introduction

'Literacy' is increasingly used as a metaphorical term, for example in relation to media or culture. While 'academic literacy' may still be usefully interpreted in its narrow sense, it would be a mistake to separate this completely from broader issues. This is because recent changes in global economics, politics and language use have placed the issue of interpreting multiple linguistic identities in the centre of our concerns. This paper explores some relationships between language, identity, education, and academic discourse.

We all operate with an increasing number of options for identity, partly because of globalisation of media, partly because of the ubiquitous educational process, partly because of our increasing political interconnectedness. Language is of course implicated in such choices, but the terms we use ('speech community', 'non-native/native speaker', 'language learner') and the concepts behind them have not always adapted to a radically new world order.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to consider the changes that have taken place in our attitudes to language and to our identities in recent years in relation to the concept of 'literacy'. That concept, too, has changed in recent discussion, and I shall be considering the new constellation of meanings which bring together our 'selves', our language and our interpretation of the world, with particular reference to academic ambitions.

In an age of National Literacy Strategies, Literacy Targets, and concern about comparative statistics and national norms, the term 'literacy' acquires