READING SOURCES IN ENGLISH TO WRITE A LITERATURE REVIEW IN A ROMANCE LANGUAGE: A GENRE-BASED EAP COURSE IN A MASTERS PROGRAM

Leitura de fontes em inglês para escrever revisão da literatura em uma língua românica: Um curso de inglês para fins académicos baseado em gênero em um programa de Mestrado

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Abstract

This article describes a genre-based, field-specific EAP course offered in a Latin American university to Master's candidates of veterinary science who are in the process of writing literature reviews for their dissertations. As their dissertations are expected to be novel contributions, the writers need to have access to scientific information in English, although the final product will be produced in their native Romance language, Spanish. To meet this need, we capitalized on the advantages of the context, particularly the common L1 background and the field homogeneity of the course group, thus allowing for specific instruction.

Key-words: *English for Academic Purposes; Genre-based pedagogy; Reading course; English as a foreign language; Literature review.*

Resumo

Este artigo descreve um curso em campo específico de EAP baseado em gênero, oferecido em uma universidade latina americana para candidatos de Ciências Veterinárias que estão em processo de escrever a revisão de literatura de suas dissertações. Como espera-se que as dissertações apresentem contribuições originais, os autores precisam ter acesso à informação científica em inglês, embora o produto final seja produzido em sua língua nativa, o espanhol. A fim de concretizar essa necessidade, aproveitamos para fazer uso do contexto, particularmente o background comum de L1 e a homogeneidade de campo desse grupo do curso, para assim possibilitar uma instrução específica.

Palavras-chave: *Inglês para fins acadêmicos; Teoria de gênero; Ensino da leitura; Inglês como lingua estrangeira; Revisão da literatura.*

Reading Sources in English to Write a Literature Review in a Romance Language: A Genre-Based EAP Course in a Master's Program

1. Introduction

The central role of English as the language of scientific communication is by now an uncontested fact, as almost all prestigious journals publish in English. For this reason, researchers and graduate students all over the world who wish to have access to the latest scientific developments need to have knowledge of English, or at least of the special variety which Wood has called "International Scientific English" (ISE) (2001, p. 81). This variety, defined as the language used to communicate results irrespective of the academics' cultural or linguistic background is characterized by the fact that its texts have prototypical rhetorical organizations that facilitate scientific communication. As these organizations are assumed to be shared by the members of the scientific community, scientists are then expected to communicate their ideas following the conventions of their disciplines. As Kuhn says,

> There are no other professional communities in which individual creative work is so exclusively addressed to and evaluated by other members of the profession (…) Just because he is working only for an audience of colleagues, an audience that shares his own values and beliefs, the scientist can take a single set of standards for granted (1962, p. 164).

In Wood's view, ISE is an ability that scientists must develop as part of their training for both reading and writing science (2001). In countries where English is a foreign language, the development of the reading ability is the most common need among academics. In these contexts, most researchers must master this skill to access published research, and usually they read only a few science-related written genres, of which the central one is the research article (Author, 2011). In this paper we describe a course of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) taught in a context that represents a particular EFL situation. The course is part of a Master's program in the area of Veterinary Science offered by an Argentinean university. The program requires a dissertation, which must be produced in the local language, Spanish, and which is expected to be a contribution of new knowledge to the field. The course described in this paper was aimed at helping these non-Anglophone users of English to access published literature by teaching them first to efficiently read scientific texts, specifically research articles, and then to effectively use the information obtained from

them in the literature reviews (LRs) of their dissertations. This article will also report on the students' opinions before and after taking the course about their ability to read research articles in English and use sources to write the literature review in their mother tongue.

2.   Genre, contexts and pedagogy

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The development of genre theory has contributed powerful linguistic and rhetorical resources that have been applied to a variety of learning contexts. A vast number of contributions based on genre theory have greatly influenced recent studies on academic language, both in relation to the perception of language and to classroom applications. Three schools have particularly contributed to this development, the New Rhetoric, the Sydney School and the English for Specific Purposes School (Hyland, 2002; Hyon, 1996). Now with considerably blurred boundaries due to their mutual influence (Swales, 2009), these three traditions have greatly enhanced academic pedagogy by focusing on social perspectives and linguistic resources for the description and interpretation of texts. These schools' insights into the culture of the academy and the language of science have shown that texts are functional in particular communities, are staged in relatively predictable forms, and although subject to change, present genre-specific regularities (Hyland, 2002; Swales, 1990; 2004). The development of awareness about these regularities, both rhetorical and linguistic, has proved to be an effective tool in EAP courses for the discoursal empowerment of non-Anglophone scholars (Adam & Artemeva, 2002; Belcher & Braine, 1995; Byrnes, 2006; Crane, 2006; Cargill & O´Connor, 2009; Flowerdew, 2002; Hyon, 2002; Pang, 2002).

EAP practice, however, is highly heterogeneous, as it differs greatly depending on the contexts in which it develops. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) identified a continuum of four EAP contexts based on different criteria. Two of these criteria, the students' native language and the role of English in the country where EAP is taught, are particularly relevant in relation to the course described here. At one extreme of the continuum are contexts where English is taught as a second language (ESL), such as

the United States or Great Britain. In such countries, English is the native language, and EAP is taught to international students coming from different linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds. At the other extreme are contexts where English is a foreign language (EFL), is used only as an auxiliary language, and is generally taught to homogeneous groups in terms of native language and disciplines. Such is the case of countries speaking Romance languages, as Eastern and Western Europe, and Latin America. In these contexts the lack of direct exposure to the English language has been considered to be one of the greatest disadvantages for students. However, there are characteristics that seem to compensate for the lack of exposure to English, and to favor genre-based instruction. In an analysis of the distinguishing features of the Latin American situation, Author (2011) highlights aspects of the context that can be capitalized on. She observes, for example, that courses in EFL situations are generally offered to homogeneous groups in terms of discipline, which allows for field-specific instruction. Another aspect that positively influences teaching is the homogeneity of the students' L1 background, as it is a Latin-based language, and Latin has greatly influenced the formal registers of English. This disciplinary and linguistic homogeneity represents a clear advantage for the learners in areas such as vocabulary learning. Further, in these contexts, the learners usually have highly specific needs, which allows for concentration on the teaching of one skill, and even one genre, at a time.

The applicability of the genre theory can be exemplified in the fact that it has been used as a framework to inform pedagogical decisions in the different EAP contexts described by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998). Recent EAP literature informs about genre-based courses in both EFL and ESL contexts that have successfully helped to develop academic skills, most of them being centered on the writing ability. In these courses teaching has mainly focused on the development of awareness about the rhetorical aspects of the genres taught and about the linguistic resources specifically used in scientific communication. In ESL contexts, courses are taught to undergraduates, graduates and/or professionals from heterogeneous disciplinary fields and a variety of native language backgrounds (e.g., Dudley-Evans, 1995; Jacoby, Leech & Holten, 1995; Johns, 2002). The literature also provides information about the reading ability in genre-based courses, both in ESL and EFL contexts. A case in an ESL context is Hyon's (2002), which describes a course taught

in an American university to a group of non-native undergraduate and graduate students, as well as to university staff from different disciplines. As for EFL contexts, particularly in Latin America, the development of reading skills has been considered of central importance. In Brazil, for example, reading was for a time the only skill taught.

3.   Brief review on the literature review

The genre-based reading course described in this article capitalized on aspects of the Latin American situation, particularly on the specific students' needs and on the group's homogeneity. Thus, the course addressed the students' immediate need to read research articles in English for writing their literature reviews in Spanish. The literature review (LR) has been described as a part-genre of a dissertation or a paper (Swales & Lindemann, 2002) which may be integrated to the introduction, or may appear as a separate section (Bunton, 2002; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). It also occurs in other academic texts, such as the dissertation proposal and the grant proposal. The LR is considered to be of central importance as it provides an opportunity for writers to present themselves as knowledgeable about the state of the art of the discipline and be able to negotiate knowledge with other members of the scientific community (Boot & Beile, 2005). The negotiation that takes place in the LR requires the integration of previous studies. For this integration, it is necessary for the writers to, first, critically read previous contributions to the field, then select those that are both significant to the scientific community and relevant to the purposes of the study (Berenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Maxwell, 2006; Myers, 1990), and finally assemble the different contributions into a single text by adequately paraphrasing, summarizing or quoting the sources used (Dubois, 1988).

Various authors have contributed information offering resources to improve the writing of a LR, such as studies on citation structures (Dubois, 1988; Swales, 1990), linguistic resources for writers' positioning in relation to the literature cited (Hyland, 1999; Thompson & Ye, 1991), and formal and functional differences of citations across sections (Author, 2008). However, less attention has been paid to the argument built through the integration of sources, which is specific to the LR. There are

relatively few illuminating contributions which provide insights into the construction of the LR argument and offer possible organizing architectures. These architectures have served as a point of departure for instruction in genre-based courses (Dovey, 2010; Swales & Lindemann, 2002; Weissberg & Buker, 1990). Of special applicability for the purposes of the course described in this paper is Swales and Lindemann's experience of teaching the LR to EFL graduate students in an American university. Using topic-related abstracts, these authors encouraged the course participants to perceive common aspects, and to decide how those aspects could serve as sources of organization for a potential literature review. As a result, the students produced "architectures" (2002, p. 111) with different organizing principles, such as chronologies, problem-solution patterns, or schemas based on methods, results or locations. All of the organizations proposed were adequately justified by the students. This experience led Swales to conclude that there is no specific rule for the argumentative architectures of LRs, and that "success lies in the LR writer convincing the reader that there *is* an organizing mind at work" (2004, p. 211, original emphasis).

4.   Course description

The EAP course described here is a mandatory 30-hour course taught for the Master's program of Inocuidad y Calidad de Alimentos (Food Safety and Quality Assurance) in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of an Argentinean university. Only the reading materials and the activities are in English, as the language used for instruction is Spanish, the students' mother tongue.

The course was taught in 2010 to 21 students. Most students were veterinarians, the rest belonging to related scientific areas. Nineteen students were Argentinean; one was from Panamá and another from Colombia. When the course began, half of the students had already defined their thesis topics, and all the students could at least define their research interests. Although the majority of the students (90%) had some kind of previous experience studying English, most had a very low level of proficiency, and none had ever received formal EAP instruction. To describe this course, we will

concentrate on three aspects: the context, the content offered, and the methodological stages involved.

4.1   Context

In the academic contexts of Latin America English is a foreign language. Both undergraduate and graduate courses are taught in the native language of the country, Spanish or Portuguese. In the particular context of our university, and probably in other Latin American universities, it may be perceived that the integration of International Scientific English as part of the disciplinary knowledge (Wood, 2001) varies depending on the disciplines, probably due to different research traditions in particular fields. In chemistry and biology, which are areas with an established tradition, researchers both use scientific English themselves and encourage their undergraduate students to do so (Author, 2011). On the other hand, in veterinary medicine the students are not so commonly exposed to scientific English, and they do not perceive the need to use sources in English until they have to write their dissertations. Only then does the need for EAP instruction become more evident. The EAP course described here is offered to those students who have completed most of the content courses of their program and are in the process of writing their dissertation projects. Thus, it may be expected that they can contribute their own experience to the interpretation of the texts in English used in the course.

4.2   Content

The content offered was mainly linguistic but in the content of the specific discipline. The materials were specific, that is, related to the students' fields of interest. This specificity allowed us to concentrate on the linguistic content, particularly vocabulary, lexico-grammatical structures and generic stages. The materials used constitute the most distinct feature of the course: a model paper, abstracts, and examples in the activities, which were selected considering the research topics of the students attending the course.

4.3   Course stages

The course had three stages: development of genre awareness through the reading of a RA; selection and reading of abstracts related to the students' specific dissertation topics; and discussion of the abstracts selected to build the architectures of possible LRs.

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4.3.1 Stage 1: Developing genre awareness

The development of awareness brings to the learners' conscience aspects and features of texts that had not been evident before (van Lier, 1996). Consciousness is key for the association of rhetoric and language with the narrative of science (Myers, 1990) as represented in RAs. For the development of genre awareness (Devitt, 2004; Hyland, 2003; Hyon, 2001) we followed four steps: (a) raising cultural awareness, particularly of the roles of science-related texts and of participants in the negotiation of new knowledge, (b) analyzing titles, (c) perceiving the characteristics of vocabulary, and (d) discussing the argument of science in research articles.

For raising cultural awareness we focused on the socio-cultural function of the RA in the context of science. To do so, we discussed the role of the different actors involved in the construction of new knowledge and their relationships in terms of writers, audience and evaluation (Bazerman, 1988; Myers, 1990; Swales, 1990, 2004). We also concentrated in the similarities and differences of texts that are functional in science, as research articles, popular science, reviews and books.

For the second step, analyzing titles, we used article titles related to the students' specific field of study. We obtained these titles from the Internet access and databases of the online library available in our research institutions (http://www.biblioteca.mincyt.gob.ar/). Titles in general are lexically dense, but simple in structure (Dudley-Evans, 1984; Haggan, 2004; Soler, 2011). The fact that the content words in them are mostly Spanish cognates and can be easily recognized on the basis of the learners' scientific experience makes the reading of titles highly accessible. Also, as titles are the most distilled form of the scientific argument, their analysis provides an opportunity to reflect about the argument of the text.

The third step was a focus on the specific characteristics of the vocabulary of science, particularly the limited set of words used, the high amount of repetition present, and the formulaic nature of many of the expressions used (Nation, 2001). To raise awareness about these characteristics, we used the selected course text, and analyzed it with the program for corpus analysis, namely Wordsmith Tools (Scott, 2004). The program provides the frequency of the words used, as well as clusters or bundles (Biber, Johanson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999; Cortés, 2004; Coxhead & Nation, 2001). In general, a small proportion of words which are highly repeated (between 200 and 300 words) account for about 80% to 90% of an individual text. Equally, there are usually three- or four-word clusters that occur at least three times in the same text. This evidence contributed to the students' awareness of the limited set of words that are necessary to handle the literature of a specific discipline (Author et al, 2009; Hyland & Tse, 2007). We consider that this step should precede the actual reading of the text, as it gives an opportunity to present the vocabulary of the course article, and to open expectations related to the actual content of the text to be read in the course.

We then turned to reading and analyzing the argument of science. In this fourth part, the different rhetorical structures and corresponding moves typical of each of the four article sections were presented (Bloor, 1999; Brett, 1994; Dudley-Evans, 1986; Thompson, 1993; Swales, 1990), and they were then visualized and analyzed in the sample text. We also focused on linguistic aspects that contribute to building the scientific argument, such as tense, modality and specific expressions used for evaluation, attitude and positioning (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Hyland 1999; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Swales, 1990).

4.3.2 Stage 2: Reading abstracts

In this part of the course, the students accessed the on-line university library to search for texts. The activities on titles prepared the learners for the selection of papers relevant to their thesis topics. It was possible to form groups of three or four students sharing similar research interests; each group selected between five and eight articles and worked with the abstracts. Following Swales and Lindemann (2002), the students

were required to recognize the moves in these abstracts.

4.3.3 Stage 3: Discussing architectures

At this stage, we reflected on the need to organize the literature into a persuasive argument (Swales & Lindemann, 2002). The groups were required to propose criteria to organize the abstracts chosen. To do this, they considered possible architectures, which were then orally presented and argued for in class. This discussion was a proof to the students themselves that they were able to argue about ideas learnt from sources in English, and that they were ready to use those ideas for their dissertations, despite their limited knowledge about the language.

4.4 Assessment

For the final work, the students had to complete a written take-home project using search engines to find scientific articles in international journals matching their research interests, read the texts in English, and explain in Spanish how the texts chosen would contribute to the literature review of their Masters theses. The assignment asked the students to explain the aims of their thesis proposal briefly, use online search engines to find ten titles related to their thesis topics, download the article abstracts and analyze them by identifying the moves present. Finally, they had to propose a set of criteria for including and organizing the information of each abstract in the literature review of their theses.

It is worth mentioning that all the students managed to complete the task, by finding and reading updated and relevant information from peer-reviewed journals of their own discipline. The authenticity of this assessment task made the students work according to their individual academic aims, as revealed by the relevance of the abstracts chosen, and their sound arguments for including them and organizing the information in their theses.

5.   Students' opinions

We were interested in learning about the students' opinions regarding the influence of the approach implemented. With this aim, we administered a short questionnaire before the course and a slightly modified version of it after the course. Both questionnaires asked students about (1) their perceived ability to read texts of their field of specialization in English, and (2) their perceived ability to use information in English to write their dissertations in Spanish. The data provided by these two items were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In the questionnaire after the course, an open-ended question was added, in which students were asked to reflect on the effects of the course on their abilities for reading scientific texts. The data provided by this third item were analyzed qualitatively.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire administered before the course showed that the majority of the students felt that they could read texts of their own disciplines in English and use the information to write in Spanish. The qualitative data from the same instrument provided more precise details. Particularly, the data reflected that some students felt very uncomfortable reading in English; further, they concluded that they had comprehension difficulties, and that they needed to rely on resources such as dictionaries or on-line translators. The qualitative analysis also revealed that some students were able to read research articles when they could resort to the knowledge of their field.

After taking the course, the whole group of students agreed that they felt capable of reading scientific texts in English before writing up their own research in Spanish. The qualitative results were revealing as students confirmed that they had benefited from the genre-based approach of the course. This result was re-affirmed and further supported by the responses to the third item in the questionnaire administered after the course, in which the students explained the changes in their academic reading and writing abilities. In this item, students wrote that they had experienced positive changes, which they considered to be the result of one of the following factors, or a combination of them: (a) the ability to understand the rhetorical organization of research articles; (b) the suggestions and practice provided about how to search for and select texts that were

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relevant to their research topics, (c) their noticing of the function and value of certain linguistic elements in the research article, (d) their reflection about different ways of organizing the information in English before writing up articles in Spanish. The students' opinions in this item suggest that the course provided them with the tools for selecting and reading scientific texts related to their research needs, and for organizing information from sources to write the literature review of their MSc dissertations.

Apparently, the awareness that the students gained in the course as far as the rhetorical and linguistic features of research articles helped them to overcome their negative feelings about reading in English by providing them with knowledge and skills that they could transfer to new reading situations in the academic context.

6.   Final remarks

The course presented here was designed to meet the highly specific needs of Master's candidates in the process of writing their dissertations. Our aim, in the first place, was to capitalize on their disciplinary knowledge, as it could help the students to gain confidence. Secondly, we aimed at making the students aware not only of how the texts they need to read are constructed, but also of how those texts can be used. The course focused on the RA rhetoric and its linguistic conventions, and also on the expectations of the community as to what a literature review should include. The ideas included in this pedagogical proposal could be of interest to other EAP practitioners in EFL contexts sharing similar features.

We consider that the following aspects make this course different from others and are the features that, in our opinion, have contributed to its success: engagement, meaningfulness, authenticity, and specificity. In this course, learners are not considered blank slates; rather, the course capitalizes on the specific scientific knowledge that they have acquired in the Masters' program. Thus, active engagement is possible as the learners' contribute their knowledge of field and research. The course is meaningful for the students as it attends to a specific immediate need at the right moment, that is, the learners need to read in English when they are in the process of writing their dissertations. Furthermore, we could notice that the use of authentic texts and abstracts

selected by the learners added to motivation because the texts were directly useful and relevant for their dissertations. Finally, we prioritized content and genre specificity, which made reading in a foreign language accessible, in spite of the learners' lack of previous knowledge of English.

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