

Writing in post-graduate coursework: a case for a dynamic model.

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Writing in post-graduate coursework - a case for a dynamic model.

This essay was written by a student in an MBA and is part of my study into academic writing. MBA courses are not new. They and a number of other coursework, post graduate courses have existed for a long time, notably in Faculties of Education.

Abstract:

Much of the research into student academic writing has centred on problems students encounter and on pedagogical solutions to these problems. This paper considers student writing taken in its social and institutional context. It suggests that the static model of student writing which is implicit in common perceptions is less generative than an understanding of the process as being dynamic for both lecturer and student and highlights how the diverse cohort currently in Australian university courses is changing academic writing. Illustration is given by reference to a study of a Master of Business Administration class with a diverse mix of students.

Introduction

Post-graduate course-work subjects in Australian universities provide an appropriate and important site for research into student academic writing. Many faculties have had such courses for a long time, notably Faculties of Education, but universities are currently experiencing a proliferation in such courses. In most such courses students are required to complete formal pieces of academic writing of a substantial length. The research on which this paper is based looked at the production of one such essay by students in a Master of Business Administration (MBA) course.

The impetus for the study comes from an interest in the increasing number of overseas students enrolled in post-graduate courses and the perceived problems these students have

with writing. The framing of the issue in this way is premised on two assumptions, that of a convenient categorisation of students into "overseas" and "local", and the labelling of the issues relating to their writing as "problems". Both of these assumptions require critical examination. Are there differences between local and overseas students which are helpful in the consideration of their writing? And is there a better way of looking at the essay writing of students than to see it as a "problem"?

Diversity of students

Overseas students in Australian universities cannot be classified as a homogeneous group. Commonwealth government statistics list eighty eight countries of origin of such students (Department of Employment Education and Training 1995). The countries include those where English is the first language and those where it is not. Amongst those where it is not, are included a variety of language groups with each providing differing levels of difficulty for students in switching to English. The countries of origin include some where the language of instruction in educational institutions is English, some where there is no English taught and a great variety between. Australian universities do require a minimum level of competency in English for entry but this is defined in different ways in different courses and in different universities. A minimum entry level does not imply homogeneity and there is, furthermore, an additional issue of the relationship between entry criteria and writing competency at university. Most of the entry criteria have had limited research. The most universally used measure for overseas students is the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and its link to academic success is described as "murky" (Graham 1987, p.506) and "still an unknown" (Criper and Davies 1988, p.65). In Australia, a study by Gibson and Rusek concluded, "...that while IELTS is a useful predictor of language proficiency, there is no direct link between IELTS scores and academic success" (Rusek 1993, p.23). Overseas students contain within their numbers a great diversity of language competence.

The diversity of students in university courses is not confined to those enrolled from overseas. Australia is now an ethnically very diverse country and this is increasingly reflected in university populations. It has been estimated that 25 percent of the university population are students whose native language is not English (Reid 1995). Universities have significantly diversified their intake of students in the past thirty years both in terms of sheer numbers and also in terms of student backgrounds (Baldauf 1996). Allan Luke talks of, "...the challenges of increasingly complex and hybrid student identities" (Luke 1997, p.7). It is clear that the students who are doing the writing, which is the focus of interest in this study, are from very diverse backgrounds. What is less clear is whether this is reflected in current understandings of academic writing. What is the connection between the dominant linguistic practices and conventions of our universities and the writing of this student cohort?

The "problem" of writing

There are two approaches to writing which lead to highlighting student writing as a problem. The first arises from a common assumption amongst non-specialists in the literacy area who tend to see writing as a set of skills which students have to learn, presumably in school or in other pre-university training, and can then be applied to writing an academic essay. Difficulties in writing at university are then seen as failures in preparing students for university study. Students are judged to lack the required writing skills. Their situation fits neatly with a health metaphor (Skillen 1997). They need curing and should ideally be given the medicine of remedial courses in special clinics with names such as Learning Support Units where they are treated with courses of grammar and essay construction.

Often though this view has replaced by a second approach which gives attention to the broader issues of learning and social context. This approach has been termed 'academic

'socialisation' (Lea and Street 1998 p,159). In this model, students are inducted into the discourse community of which they are becoming members. Students need to be oriented and adapt to the institution of the university. In writing they must learn and adopt, either implicitly or by direct teaching, the genre of the discipline in which they now find themselves. The "problem" is one of students who do not mould into the shape demanded by the university.

The truths represented in these models are at best partial and fail to reflect the complex nature of both the writing act and of the universities in which the writing is situated. Universities are not homogeneous institutions. Writing expectations differ markedly not only between the many disciplines contained within universities but also from lecturer to lecturer. The tendency of the above approaches is to enumerate the skills involved in academic writing, to define the form of the genre to be used, or the characteristics of the discourse community in which the writing is set. These give the impression of something which is fixed and definable, and to which the student can be moulded. They may represent a simplified and idealised version of university study and academic writing. They do not represent the reality.

"New literacy" approaches

Theorists are now postulating "third approaches" (Lea and Street 1998; Wells 1998) which to some extent incorporate the writing skills and academic socialisation models described above but further incorporate social understandings of literacy developed from the area of "new literacy studies" (Barton 1994; Baynham 1995; Street 1995). These approaches view student writing more broadly as an aspect of the social, institutional and epistemological context and consider issues of power relations and identities.

These newer approaches highlight a number of aspects of academic writing which are not transparent in earlier approaches. One aspect is that writing can be viewed as a dynamic process. This introduces a paradox because, unlike oral discourse which can be part of an ongoing dialogue, an academic essay once written and submitted has its words fixed. It seems essentially a static entity. However academic writing can be considered in the light of two ways in which it is dynamic. Firstly, because meaning is located in the reading of the text, it is continually open to re-interpretation. Secondly the diversity in the current student cohort is changing what is acceptable writing.

Social constructivism

A helpful starting point for understanding writing in this way is provided by a branch of socio-psychological research, albeit not an uncontested one, in which reality is assumed to be socially constructed, multiple and dynamic. One way of describing the development of individual meaning is that each person shapes their own social world within themselves but it is also shaped by their interactions with others (Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-Limerick 1998). Meanings are continuously constructed and reconstructed both within the individual and through social interactions. Shared meanings are created through these social interactions and these meanings constitute social reality. (Berger and Luckman 1967)

It follows therefore that accepting the social constructedness of reality means that the assumption of a single, static reality gives way to temporary, negotiated and constructed realities. So cognitive representations of the world, of which writing an essay could be one, are to be viewed as fluid syntheses of past and present which will be reconstructed differently again when revisited in the future (Berger and Luckman 1967).

Burgess-Limerick points out that the assumption of the social constructedness of reality, at its most extreme would lead to the conclusion that two people are locked into their own social worlds and no shared understanding is possible (Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-Limerick 1998, p. 63). However life is lived on the basis of the assumption of shared meanings (Gergen and Gergen 1991). And although the experience of interacting individuals can never be identical they are connected and inferences can be made. Kapferer puts it helpfully, "Your experience is made mine; I experience my experience of you" (Kapferer 1986, p.159). So the lecturer in reading an academic essay assumes meanings of words and sentences are largely shared with the student writer and presumes to understand the student's meaning. What the student writes is his* experience. What the lecturer reads is her* experience of that.

(* Note that for convenience here, where gendering is necessary, the masculine gender is given to the student and female to the lecturer.)

Vygotskian notions

The application of these notions to writing is helped by the work of Lev Vygotsky, the Russian, whose writings from the 1920 & 30's are now being revisited by theorists in this area. Zebroski draws out these notions from Vygotsky's work.

1. to understand higher mental functions one must trace their genesis in shared social relations,
2. to understand higher mental functions and their sources in social relations one must view both developmentally,
3. to understand the development of higher mental functions and their relation to such activity as writing.....one must view language dynamically as a realm of clashing forces and far more than can be understood from any communication model of writing.

(Zebroski 1994, p.156)

Vygotsky claims whatever an individual can do independently (intramental functioning) is the result of social experiences between their own mind and others - an intermental experience (Wertsch 1991). Where two individuals interact be it directly such as in a lecture or discussion, or indirectly such as through the reading of a text, an intermental encounter takes place. The discourse of that interaction, the language and the way knowledge is shaped and valued, is part of what is learned or communicated in the encounter. It has the potential for growth for the participants. In future performance the participants may draw on the experiences of that encounter that they have internalised, made intramental. So in writing an academic essay, students draw from their experiences of the discourses available to them as a result of their internalising of past encounters (Ivanic 1997 p.51).

Every person carries within themselves a lifetime of intermental encounters, "a constantly shifting amalgam of words and images, voices and tones, that seem to be at the heart of consciousness as we individually experience it ...- the social product of a long and specific development history" (Zebroski 1994, p.166). It is not fixed because it is developing through on going social relations and through the shifting intramental workings within every person. It is this which provides the basis for acquiring the discoursal repertoire available at the moment of writing (Ivanic 1997, p.52).

Writing as "an act of being"

An important aspect of understanding the way academic writing is changing is to appreciate the notion of the writer, as well as doing something, as being represented in the text.

Roz Ivanic, discusses this in her book, "Writing and Identity"(Ivanic 1997), and takes this relatively simple diagram of a writer doing something...

reader

considers

writer interprets

represents

subject matter (=text)

(Ivanic 1997 , p.95)

Here the text is thought to consist of subject matter which the writer represents and the reader interprets.

She transforms this to a diagram where the writer is also represented as being something:

reader (as performer)

interprets

considers

= text

writer represents

(as performer)

interprets

reality

(Ivanic 1997, p.96)

She uses Goffman's notion of writer, and reader, as performers representing themselves in the text as a character (Goffman 1969). It is a useful notion in that it makes clear that what is portrayed in writing, a discoursal self, is not identical to the autobiographical self, the writer, as performer, the socially constructed, constantly changing self of a developing life history. So in writing an academic essay the student negotiates, largely subconsciously, among the

alternative possible ways of being positioned by those discourses he has available and presents himself as he feels he wants the reader to see him.

A dynamic model

A notion which includes the writer as being represented in the text necessarily opens the possibility for seeing the dynamic aspects of writing because of the developing self which is inscribed there. However in diagrams such as those of Ivanic where the text is represented by a fixed shape which dominates the diagram, something quite static is communicated even unintentionally.

A different sort of diagram results when the essay writing is represented as a point in time of the life history of those involved with it. A time line approach can be used.

Life before the MBA* Doing the MBA Writing Reading/ Beyond

Responding MBA

LECTURER

STUDENT

20 + to 50+ years and beyond 6 mnths - 3 years 1- 6 weeks 2-3 weeks beyond

* or whatever university course is under consideration.

In this diagram the text, or essay is represented by the small square. This is the text of Ivanic's diagram but relevant is that the whole of this time-line can be related to the essay. Also highlighted are two, not one, key players, the lecturer as well as the student. It is lecturer who will read the essay and form meaning from the words it contains.

Throughout the period before the essay writing task, from the time of birth, each student is acquiring the set of discourses from which they will draw to write. Especially for those students who have been born overseas and educated in institutions in countries other than Australia, the conventions and practices associated with essay writing may have been quite different than those educated in Australia. Revisions and additions to the students' discoursal possibilities will also take place during the time in the Australian university because the essays will also be strongly influenced by their relationships with the lecturers and classmates, their reading of references and their internalisation of these experiences made here.

Meanwhile the lecturer who will read the essay is also acquiring a set of discourses quite differently. She brings to her reading of the text a set of expectations as a result of her life

history. Likewise in reading the essay the lecturer is engaging with the ideas and the language of the student. It is important to recognise that the lecturer is also being continuously reconstructed. These relationships are necessarily two way and an element of dynamism is introduced by the influence on the lecturer of the reading of a diverse set of essays. Thus the lecturer who is the one assessing the essay is open to changing her view on what acceptable as a piece of academic writing.

When the student cohort is as diverse as it is in Australian universities currently, the notion of a single dominant academic writing discourse continuing to prevail is challenged by the dynamism inherent and demonstrated by this model.

THE STUDY

Study outline

The foregrounding of the possibilities for shifting viewpoints and change in academic writing can be illustrated with examples from a study of a class in an MBA course at an Australian University.

The total MBA group of 430 students had 33% of its students enrolled as overseas students from eighteen countries and representative of the type of diversity which the preceding discussion implied. The research involved a close ethnographic study of twelve volunteer students from within one subject of the MBA. The researcher audited this subject and participated with students both within the lectures and through normal social interaction during the course. Lectures were audiotaped, all course material was collected and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students and with the lecturers both before and after the major essay writing assignment. The essays themselves and the lecturers comments on them also formed part of the data.

Diversity of students

The twelve students who were the participants in the case study of this research are indicative of the diversity of the students within post-graduate courses within Australian universities. The table below lists some basic biographical data of these students but additional information which formed part of the data collected further illustrates this diversity and also how any attempts to make simple divisions on the basis of being enrolled as "local" or "overseas" masks some of the diversity. Miriam who was enrolled as a local student was classified thus only because her parents lived for a time in Australia before she was born and had taken and retained Australian citizenship. Prior to enrolling in the course in Australia, Miriam had lived her whole life in Israel, spoken Hebrew at home and been educated in that language, learning English only as a foreign language. Sachin had migrated to Australia from India twelve months prior to enrolling in the course and so qualified to be enrolled as a local student. His education and previous language experiences had contained a mix of English and local Indian languages. Amongst the students enrolled as overseas, the table indicates the mix of previous English language experience. This group includes Claire, German by nationality, but who had spent several of her senior secondary years living with her parents in England and was observed within the MBA students mixing readily and easily with Australian educated students. Likewise detailed information on a number of the other students reflects the complexity in biographical data. The case study group of students is an illustration of the diversity within university classrooms and one which cautions against any simplified assumptions of previous language or socio-cultural experience.

CASE STUDY STUDENTS

student	enrolment	nationality	education
Ali	overseas	Sri Lankan	mainly in Singhalese
Claire	overseas	German	in German (EFL & 3 yrs in England)
Sariga	overseas	Thai	school in Thai/Univ in English
Jenny	overseas	Vietnamese	in Vietnamese
Ramon	overseas	Sri Lankan	mainly Singhalese
Caroline	local	Australian	in Australian English
Mick	local	Australian	in Australian English
Judy	local	Australian	in Australian English
Brendan	local	British	English in Sth Africa, England and Wales
Stephanie	local	Australian	in Australian English (mother German)
Miriam	local	Israeli/Australian	in Hebrew
Sachin	local	Indian	local (Indian) language/English

The essay

The essay writing assignment which formed the basis for the research was in an MBA subject called, "Foundations of Management." One of the areas of study within this subject was Business Ethics and the essay topic set for that area was, "What environmental standards are appropriate when Western Multi-nationals do business in developing countries? Are Shell's dealings with the Nigerian government defensible?" An illustration of the way in which academic writing is being influenced by the student writing is made by looking at some the expectations communicated to students by the lecturers before the students wrote the essay and considering the adjusted expectations of the lecturer after reading the essays. The essay written by one of the students, Sachin, is used as the focus of attention. The illustration used relates to English language writing conventions and to surface features of "correctness" in English language use. While this is somewhat of a basic issue, more complex aspects of academic discourse are also involved in issues of difference and change but the feature used here serves as a clear illustration of the influence of the student essays on the writing accepted as satisfactory by the lecturers.

Expectations of the essay

Students were given the essay topics early in the first week of the course. Specific instructions were given regarding length and presentation, "Approximately 2,500 words - about 8 typed A4 pages, double spaced" and a two page document headed "Notes on

written work" was also given to the students. None of the current lecturers were clear on the origin of this document but understood that it had been used within the MBA course for a number of years as an essay writing guide. The notes suggested that students consult an essay writing guide and recommended, Kate L Turabian's *A Manual for Writers*. It indicated that students should keep in mind a number of conventions applying to academic papers listed under headings such as "Tables and Figures", "References and Bibliography", "Quotes", and several others. The content of these was consistent with academic conventions in Australian universities. Of interest was what was included under the heading, "Spelling and Grammar"

Spelling and Grammar. If using the "z" spelling of words like "organization", then do so consistently throughout the paper for all similar words ("specialization", for example), except when referring to titles or when quoting extracts from works in which alternative spellings are used. The same rule applies if using the "s" spelling. Avoid slang and ungrammatical constructions. Proof read essays before submitting them for examination.

The singling out a such a particular spelling convention as the consistent use of "z" suggests a special focus on getting the details of expression correct. The warning to, "Avoid ungrammatical constructions" is a general indication to students to write in correct sentence structure and the like, although this is not spelt out in detail. It is reasonable for students to make the assumption that lecturers expected that the conventions of correct English should be followed in the writing of the essay.

Writing the essay

One of the volunteer students in this research, Sachin, came to Australia from India a little over a year before the semester in which the study was made. He had learnt English at school in India and completed an undergraduate degree and a Masters degree in an Indian university, where some of his instruction was in English. He said in interview that his English was "very good" and that he preferred to write in English. He had completed an English language test before coming to Australia and had obtained the highest mark of any in his group in that test. He reported that his mark of 23 out of a possible 24 was not a perfect score only because of a difficulty with pronunciation. Sachin expressed the expectation of obtaining a high grade for his essay.

In writing his essay, Sachin, like most of the other students took seriously the "Notes on written work" given to the students. He finished a near-complete draft of his essay over one week before it was due and used the time before handing it in to make corrections and adjustments.

Sachin began his essay,

"Capitalism in 21st century is the rapid destruction of the environment. capitalism has completely disregarded the need to preserve an efficiently functioning natural environment(Reutur business news, 1996). This situation started to change in 1970's in developed countries....."

Several issues arise from the first sentence. The reader will readily make the assumption that he is referring to the 20th century and not the 21st. It is also necessary to place a "the" before the number to follow the usual conventions of English language sentences. Further the meaning of the first sentence is not clear unless the reader is willing to add such as, "responsible for" so that the sentence reads, "Capitalism in the 20th century is *responsible for* the rapid destruction of the environment".

The second sentence lacks the capitalisation that is a convention of English sentences and a check of Reuter's Business News shows it to be a use of the exact words contained there but here is lacking the quotation marks that would be expected in an academic essay.

The essay continues in like manner with most of the sentences being comprehensible but containing many sentences which do not fit English language conventions. The errors are sometimes like those in the following sentence:

"Government is also responsible to a large extend, because government can legitimately insist that corporate activities not cause harm and the corporations therefor must take active steps to prevent potentially harmful activities."

Here Sachin has used, "extend" mistakenly for, "extent" and omitted an "e" from the end of "therefore". The errors violate the advice which is inherent in the focus on detail given to the students prior to the essay writing but do not hamper understanding what Sachin has to say in this sentence.

Other errors are of a different nature. Sachin wrote:

"Shell acted as if there is no truth in allegations of environmental devastation in Ogoni and other operating areas. It is clearly visible that the devastation happened to Ogoni land is the consequence of Shell's operation in that area. Shell can't exonerate itself by claiming that most of MOSOP's demands are out side the scope of oil producing companies and is the responsibility of government. As a result there followed was massive human rights violations though by government actions."

The early sentences here follow the pattern of having expressions outside the normal conventions of academic writing, even to the use of the contraction, "can't" instead of "cannot" but the meaning is clear. In the final sentence, the meaning is more problematic. Given the structure of the sentence, it is not clear what had led to, "a result", but if the sentence immediately prior is omitted it is then clearer. It reads, "...the consequence of Shell's operation in the area. As a result there followed..." Sachin is saying that Shell's operations are responsible. To make the meaning clear it is also necessary to omit, "was" so that the sentence reads, "As a result there followed massive human rights violations..." or to change, "there" to "what". To understand the final part of the sentence - "though by government actions" - involves specialised knowledge of Shell's relationship with the Nigerian government which is not explained here and is not generally what a student should expect a reader to assume. In this case Sachin's use of English makes comprehension difficult and is dependent on the reader pausing to make assumptions about Sachin's intentions.

Sachin's essay contained a total of ninety sentences. An error count showed that seventy-two of these contained one or more examples of expression which is not considered correct by the conventions of academic essays in Australian universities. Sachin's essay was similar to those produced by a number of students in the MBA class in terms of percentage of sentences not following the seemingly rigid attention to details of expression expected in the "Notes on written work" document given out by the lecturers.

Reading the essay

The essay was one of seventy read and graded by the lecturer in the MBA unit of work. The essays were marked under what the lecturer described as, "..terrible, terrible time

pressures". She graded about 120 essays in two subjects in a ten day period. The researcher interviewed the lecturer some two weeks later. Part of that interview involved the lecturer re-reading the essays of some of the case-study students in the research project and commenting further on the essays. The transcript reproduced here is part of that which focussed on Sachin's essay and commences after the lecturer (L) and the researcher (R) together, have been silently reading the essay for a few minutes.

L Well, it is full of errors. "...fit into above principle we should understand the relation between business and society." (reading aloud from essay)

R. Yeah it is in expression. What I am interested in knowing is how it is regarded.

L This one is reading quite well to me. Yes it is.

R. OK.

L (continues to read silently) No this one is reading quite well to me.

R. You can see what he is getting at?

L Oh yes, I can absolutely see what he is getting at. This one would have been fine. (continues reading) I can already tell that. (Laughs) Sometimes you just cannot get the flow. You really can't get the thought line.

The lecturer's first comment on the transcript is, "Well, it is full of errors". She is fully aware of the extent of the English expression problems in Sachin's essay. She recognises that it does not meet, in this regard, the expectations of such an essay as set out in the material previously given to the students. Her initial reaction to the essay, however, seems favourable: "This one is reading quite well to me". The apparent contradiction in these two responses of the lecturer was pursued by the researcher as the interview continued.

R. So you are less put off by the fact that it is not {... good} English=

L {perfect}

R. =really.

L Yeah.

R But it is OK because you can see what he is really trying to say.

L Yes. Yes. Yes. I can see where he is going. (continues reading)
Yeah, "Most of the multinationals when operate in third world countries" (5.0) It's very good.

As the lecturer continues to read, she speaks aloud some of the incorrectly expressed sentences such as, "Most of the multinationals when operate in third world countries". She nearly immediately juxtaposes against this the comment, "It's very good". She is not being sarcastic. She is responding to something other than the English expression errors in the essay. These aspects of the essay which lead to the positive response of the lecturer are

interesting and important. However the focus of interest at this point is the lecturer's response to the expression errors. The researcher continued to probe this point.

R. He's got number problems. He's got every simple English expression you can think of, like problems with tenses and number and use of "the" and "a".

L Yes. (continues reading)

"As a result there followed was massive human rights violations though by government actions"

R. Just about every sentence is incorrect in fact.

L Actually this is where reading it fast actually helps you the reader because if you read it faster you are not so focussed on all those, so if you read it more slowly you get caught in it.

R. That's interesting.

L (continues reading) See, I like this one. This one is running a definite line. And I suspect I gave him a higher mark than her.

R. I was looking to see what happens with that sort of expression as opposed to this one that writes well.

[discussion continues centred on the female student who had written an essay with fewer expression errors]

The lecturer apparently sees as the ability to ignore expression errors as a positive aspect of reading in that she says reading faster, "helps" because the focus is taken away from the errors and she describes a slower read, where the errors become more noticeable as getting, "caught in it". The lecturer seemingly wishes not to take into account the incorrect expressions in Sachin's essay. The influence of this on the grading of the essay is then the focus of the researcher's questions.

R. Are you able to say in your mind how you would discount that mark, the mark you would give this person as opposed to some-one who'd taken a similar line and written well?

L Yes I know. I don't think I would have discounted this student. I don't feel I would have discounted this student. Because, because I can actually get the drift and because I actually know this person is a foreign student - well I assume it's a foreign student ..[some discussion clarifying the status of this student followed]. No I don't feel I would be discounting much in this case but, I think it's a thing with me that cuts in when I cannot understand the flow. I mean if it's a significant thing, then I'm very loathe, even if I might give them a ten, I wouldn't go above that and if I really thought there was no drift at all there in a direction, I'd give them probably an eight. But, what am I trying to say? Um, I don't think it's incremental with me, sort of, you know, if your sentence structure is bad .3%, I might deduct one mark,

.8%, ... I don't think it's incremental. I think that it just cuts in at a certain level where it starts to cause me serious difficulty.

R So your role is not to be concerned about ...{correcting their}=

L {their language }

R =language as such?

L Well, yes [interview continues below]

The lecturer here makes a clear statement that she believes that the type of expression in Sachin's essay does not influence her grading. She says, "I don't think I would have discounted this student" and repeats something almost identical in the following sentence as if to confirm in her mind that this is so. There is a slight equivocation in that she shortly afterwards refers to not, "discounting much". However the tenor of the lecturer's comments indicate that the expression of the students becomes a factor only when the lecturer, "cannot understand the flow".

The lecturer's comments indicate that the expression errors in Sachin's essay are not significant to her. What has not yet been illustrated is that this is a change wrought by having this writing presented to her. However the interview continues directly from that quoted above:

Land I've probably evolved in the attitude I have because having done it for quite a period of time now and having done it with a number of students who had very, very major difficulties. At the beginning, Ken and Allen (the other course lecturers) and I used to meet together and discuss what we would do about certain cases. (7.0) And mostly what we would do is we would read again very slowly. Sometimes, Ken would get the student in to set the argument out verbally. (6.0) And then if we felt that it was, you know, sort of adequate, they'd get a pass. They wouldn't get more than a pass but they'd get a pass.

R So from a lot of our conversation I pick {up ...}=

L {We } discount the language disability.

R. =you're keen to pass {the overseas students.}

L { We are very keen to }pass the overseas students. The other difficulty with them of course is you look at their other marks and you can't help being influenced by this. I look at their other marks and if the student has credits and distinctions in all the quantitative subjects, well I think this is an able person. This is a language difficulty and that pushes me further in that direction and if there weren't that background, I might be more critical then. Yes.

R. And presumably you have in mind somewhere that if they are from ...Thailand or wherever, there're going back to use their MBA in Thailand where their English language won't be {... } or what's=

L {relevant.}

R =most significant anyway.

L Yes. I suppose the other thing is, you wonder what they really gain from.. I wonder what they really gain from the part of the course that I teach - it's so brief - and back they go to their own environment and clearly this way of thinking about things is fairly alien.

The lecturer says that she has, "evolved the attitude (she has to expression errors)". "Evolved" is a word that indicates a change over a period of some time. She has changed her attitude to writing errors and she goes on to directly attribute this change to reading essays, "..of students who had very, very major difficulties." The writing of these students with difficulties has been the impetus for the lecturer to reconstruct her idea of what she regards as acceptable in academic writing. She is now prepared to, "discount the language disability". The link between her attitude to language difficulties and overseas students had been made earlier when she says of Sachin, "I don't think I would have discounted (marked down) this student... because ... I assume it's a foreign student." Here, shortly afterwards, she states that, "We are very keen to pass the overseas students". A number of issues outside the direct interest of this paper are raised by such statements but its relevance here is the influence of the perceived enrolment status of the student in the grading of the essay. It is an illustration that academic discourse and what is regarded as acceptable is being influenced by the increased diversity of students currently in university courses.

Conclusion and implications

This paper has chosen to foreground the dynamic aspects involved with academic writing. It has suggested that writing is most appropriately viewed through a socio-cultural framework. Attention in this framework enables a focus on the differing perspectives and discourses that individuals bring to writing academic essays. Because those involved, the lecturer as well has the student, are open to influence and change, the practices and conventions which dictate an essay are also open to change. Dominant discourses have existed in academia. The current cohort of post-graduate courses are a diverse group including many overseas student and because of their diversity have the potential to change previously apparently fixed academic discourses. The potential to change occurs in many of the facets of academic discourse but the one chosen for illustration from the study conducted was that of acceptance of non-conventional expression in essays where, it seemed that the non-conventional expressions of students had altered what was acceptable to lecturers in an academic essay.

The conclusion suggested here seem to run counter to those from a study of black bilingual women in higher education in Britain which concluded that dominant conventions, "constrain what they can say, how they can say it in, and what they can be" (Lillis 1997, p.182). The place and influence of minority group students is an important area for further research. The perspectives established here and the illustration from the study would suggest that, while there are privileged discourses in universities, they are subject to continuous change because of the diversity of students and writing that are now in universities. It indicates a positive reading of the statement: "Every time a writer constructs a discoursal self which draws on less privileged possibilities... they are like a drop in the ocean, infinitesimally redefining the possibilities ... which will in turn be available for future writers" (Ivanic 1997, p.28).

The implications of such a view of academic writing are open to much debate and discussion. The following list suggests only some of the issues raised by this research which merit further consideration:

- the critical role of the student - lecturer relationship in essay writing,
- the doubtful validity of the privileged position of essay writing as a tool of academic assessment.
- the role of students in shifting what counts as an acceptable essay
- the shifting operation of power relations with respect to academic discourse in our universities increasing desperation to get and keep overseas students.

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