Helping Students Make Purposeful Links With the Audience

Glenn Toh
Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Through professional reflection or reading, language teachers may come across a gem of an idea that also turns out to be practicable in the classroom. Some of these may not be extremely profound or revolutionary, but they still evoke a why-did-I-not-think-of-this-earlier feeling. This article will expand on one such idea—writing means writing for people-—inspired by works on the teaching of writing and on academic literacies like Brandt (1990), Prior (1998), Paltridge (2000) and Lillis (2003). It is written with reference to teaching academic writing to ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) learners before they enter mainstream university courses.

In the course of teaching academic writing to ESOL learners, one might come across long convoluted sentences which students believe to be sophisticated such as, "At the same time because the different in this respect of country between east and west is more obvious, understand for being convenient." Students might also use idiomatic or metaphorical forms that are not normally appropriate in academic writing, again because it is their idea of sophistication—the need to decorate writing with such forms to prove scholarship. For example, they might say that the "Customer is like God Himself to the retailer" to describe the importance of a customer to a business, "Condiments must be added to make our lives colourful" to talk about the importance of exercise and holidays, or "However, in China, universities still enjoy the meal of planned economy" to describe how universities in China remain complacent. In other instances, students might use a term from a textbook, often an IELTS or TOEFL preparation book. For example, they might use terms like *social system* loosely and liberally to mean either *society* or even just *people*.

In this article, I suggest that one way to help ESOL learners out of this difficulty is to encourage them to be more conscious of the audiences they are writing for and the need for writing to communicate with a reader. Writing in EAP means writing to be read. The sheer simplicity of this is aptly captured by Brandt when she says that "learning to write is learning that your words are being read" (p. 5) and that literacy "is not the narrow ability to deal with texts, but the broad ability to deal with people" (p. 14). For many ESOL learners, the reason for resorting to wordy convoluted sentences or

idiomatic or textbook phrases, is very probably the thought that such are the marks of scholarship. Arguably, any thought about audience is remote from their minds, or if they have any impression of audience at all, it must vaguely be one which admires some form of idiomatic or terminology-laden textbook English, captured in long convoluted sentences as in the example above.

For the teacher, the job at hand is to help students out of this mode. Given that good writing is both situated and ideological, one technique would be linking good writing with the notion of real-life audience. It would be useful for the teacher to help students come to some understanding that good writing is dependent on their audience. For more advanced classes, the teacher may also help students think through (read, expose, or deconstruct) the ideological forces responsible for shaping an audience's preferences.

Thinking About Audiences

Paltridge (2000) notes that it is good for students to know the expectations of the discourse community for whom they are writing. For a start, I have found it useful to help students brainstorm possible expectations of academic audiences, which may vary across subject areas (Lea & Street, 2000). From experience, some students initially show bemusement at the need for such a group activity. For them, their reader is very obviously a professor at a university. More gallant ones may attempt to say that the professor is probably elderly, educated, or knowledgeable. Also, I have found it is more often than not the case that the teacher has to tell students (when hinting fails) that in many universities in the English-speaking world, their peers can also be part of their audience.

What follows is that the teacher allows students the opportunity to think about a range of audiences. Lead questions can include:

1. What do you think the audiences you are writing for are looking for in your piece of writing?

2. What do you think your audiences want to know when they read your piece of work?

3. How will you enable them to understand you easily?

4. What will your audiences value most in your writing?

5. Will you write the same way for audiences from different faculties?

What is important to note, however, is that the exercise is not meant to yield a clear taxonomy of answers about what particular academic audiences expect. This view is supported in Lea and Street (2000) who observe that the expectations of academic audiences vary with their own academic world-view. The exercise, rather, is aimed at

answering Brandt's (1990) call to refocus students away from text and help them direct their thoughts at people. Brandt (1990) comes across strongly when she says the following:

> The radically social foundations of the literate orientation compel a reanalysis of literacy failures in school. In the prevailing view, students fail to the extent to which they fail to treat language objectively and separately from people (including themselves) (pp. 6-7).

Brandt goes on to say:

> Theories of literacy based on the need for decontextualization of thought and language often justify instructional practices that may mislead struggling students, deflecting them from the very sorts of clues they need to figure out reading and writing. More troubling, to characterize as antiliterate any language habits that value shared orientation and social solidarity is to foreclose on what in fact is the richest foundation of literacy (p. 7).

Following Brandt, the brainstorming exercise introduced earlier seeks to help students become more conscious of the audience, particularly the fact that the audience is not a distant abstract, but consists of real people with real expectations with whom they have to communicate intelligibly. This too must mean that students will need to focus in on their repertoire of ways to communicate comprehensibly with their audiences.

In the Classroom: Linking Language Features with Real-Life Audiences

Once students are more aware that writing for the academy involves writing for audiences, they will be in a better position to understand the demands of their writing tasks. Also, students need to understand how language features characterising academic text-types can be harnessed to communicate purposefully with real people. In relation to academic features and conventions, Paltridge (2000) notes that students need to understand how the conventions and requirements of the particular area of study, including how to use source texts and how to paraphrase, can enhance the effectiveness of their communication. This, too, supports Brandt's (1990) recommendation that students direct their thoughts at the people reading their writing.

This section will discuss how various academic conventions can be taught while keeping the audience in focus. The conventions are based on those outlined in U, Jenner, Devlin, and Grant (2004), an academic writing textbook. Two common

conventions (tentative language and reporting using paraphrase) have been chosen to illustrate how they can be taught in relation to audience. The students, who come from South Korea, Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan and other countries in the Asia Pacific region, are enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class and are studying English to help them write essays and project reports in their future areas of study. The course is designed particularly for those aiming to enroll in business-related subjects.

Tentative Language in Academic Discourse

U et al. (2004) note that tentativeness is important in academic writing as a way to modify generalisations. They outline various ways students can achieve tentativeness by using one of the following:

1. progressively weakening modal auxiliaries (e.g., People from another culture *can/may/might/could* find the Chinese address system unusual.)

2. adverbs such as *usually, probably*.

3. distancing words like *tend, seem, appear* (e.g., It would *seem/appear* that Iranian men use more body language than speech when they greet each other.)

4. qualifications of the subject such as *many, majority, in most respects, some,* (e.g., *In most respects,* Chinese superstitions about the house are also common sense.)

5. exceptions such as *with the exception of, apart from, except for* (e.g, *With the exception of* a small number of superstitions, these irrational beliefs or illogical fears have their origins in ancient beliefs and customs.)

The teacher using materials as those in U et al. (2004), must not only to teach and/or analyse the structures and patterns. Students must be challenged to think of their real-world applications and appreciate the value of tentativeness in relation to writing for academia. Teachers can elicit information about using tentativeness in academic writing from students, and often after a few minutes of group work or class discussion, they will be able to recognize its effects. For example, they see that modesty can be achieved through the use of tentative language. They discover that tentative language indicates that the writer is open to an opposite opinion or to more discussion and that it helps the writer engage the audience in discussion without alienating them with dogmatic rigidities. Students realise that tentative language gives the impression that the writer is reasonable and well-reasoned and that these are important qualities for communicating with an audience. They also see that tentative language helps the writer to make important points without imposing absolutes on the reader. As part of this discussion,

teachers can point out, if it has not been already discovered, that tentative language can also position the writer as a novice and the reader as an expert in the area under discussion. The whole process enables students to think about the people who will be reading their work, and not just about modal auxiliaries, adverbs, or distancing words.

Reporting Using Paraphrase as Part of Academic Discourse

U et. al. (2004) highlight common phrases used for acknowledging another author's ideas such as: *In an article/a study by X, As X points out, X has expressed a similar view, A study by X indicates that, X has drawn attention to the fact that.* They also highlight reporting verbs such as *claims, points out, has drawn our attention to.* Addressing the student, they point out that these words "may be attitudinal in nature; that is, the choice of a particular reporting verb will often indicate what sort of attitude you, as the writer, have about the idea or information you are reporting and its relative importance to the content of your paper" (U et al., 2004, p. 2/23).

After class discussion students are able to understand that the reporting using paraphrase technique enables the audience to see that the writer has considered and evaluated other points-of-view. They also recognize that it allows writers to show the audience their knowledge, in that they are able to demonstrate they had to read a lot of other works, and are not only able to summarise the authors' thoughts, but also present them in a way that demonstrates the authors' attitudes.

Through these techniques, students are not just taught language structures and atomised skills for their own sake, but are taught to see their significance in relation to a real audience. This is consistent with Brandt's (1990) argument against teaching language as a "detached and self-referential system of meaning" (p. 5), and her position that students must be made aware of the "who" in discourse—the personas and audiences. In addition, while attending to audience, students are reminded constantly of the need for comprehensibility and the importance of avoiding complicated structures or inappropriate idioms.

Potential for Deeper Discussion: Audiences, Ideology and Academic Conventions

Earlier I mentioned the importance of teachers helping students consider the ideological forces responsible for necessitating learning skills and conventions related to audiences. Students are encouraged to unravel what has been ideologically framed and conceptualised with the aim of teaching them to resist and/or dialogise (Lillis, 2003) these dominant ideologies. For example, the situation of a novice writing for an expert leads to an interesting discussion about what constitutes expertise and novicity. How tentative language results in modesty can lead to a discussion about why modesty is

ideologically desirable for certain audiences and how it is realised in language. However, a concern that remains is how such an interesting activity can be included in the ESOL curriculum, given institutional and other realities.

Coffee table talk in the staff room rather quickly reveals that language teachers vary in their response to discussions concerning writing, audiences, and ideology, an area now quite widely talked about in discussions of academic literacies. Some have read, understood, and eagerly support teaching academic literacies to students. Others have read, understood, and know about academic literacies, but for a number of reasons might not facilitate it in their classrooms. Other teachers know about academic literacies, but do not agree with it. Finally there are those who have never heard of academic literacies. This is not vastly different from having teachers who believe that writing should be taught as a situated sociohistoric activity (Brandt, 1990; Prior, 1998), through text description and modelling (Gerot, 1995; Paltridge, 2001), or at the level of atomised skills (Knapp, 1992; Brandt, 1990).

The point here is that given the range of philosophies in ELT and in this case EAP, and the range of beliefs about what teaching writing involves, there are sometimes constraints for encouraging students to think deeper into matters concerning writing, audience, and ideology. There is, for example, the belief that an EAP programme should concentrate on modelling the structures and forms of academic English because students are paying good money to the university to learn English—they are the proverbial geese that lay the golden eggs. They will be writing for people in academia and should be thoroughly encultured into the forms and structures of academic writing, both because it is a time-honoured practice and there is so little time for anything else. Of course, such beliefs, too, are in turn embedded in ideology.

Hence, specific skills such as "how to open or close an essay or whether to use the first person" (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 33), or "prescriptions about the use of impersonal and passive forms as opposed to first person and active forms" (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 35) become the standard fare for the course. Other old favourites include phrasal verbs, prepositions, collocations, and active and passive voices. Lea and Street (2000) call this a *skills-based deficit model*, based on atomised skills, problem-fixing, and an emphasis on surface features including grammar and spelling. They also note the "crudity and insensitivity of this approach" (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 34).

This, perhaps, is a part of current reality in some quarters of the ELT/EAP world. Foreign students pay three or four times what locals pay for their courses. In some situations, what have ideologies, deconstruction, and academic literacies to do with the real world of business English, some would say. Students all want to graduate with a piece of paper and find good jobs in tall air-conditioned office buildings in their home

countries. Students like it when teachers model texts and text-types, give them pat model answers, and talk knowledgeably about language structures. Moreover, it might even be cogently argued that the notion of audience is already subsumed within the notion of text-types. Besides, there are numerous books and software on language structures in the market and this makes for easy course planning. Because of these realities, the ideals of helping students think more deeply about audience and ideology and how these could affect writing, may have to be judiciously tempered for clientele. While this may sound pessimistic, there is still cause for optimism.

Optimistic Conclusion

For colleagues wanting to combine academic conventions, audience consciousness, and some discussion of ideologies shaping academic writing, the strategies described in this paper offer:

1. A departure from the skills-based deficit model based on atomised skills, described by Lea and Street (2000).

2. A way to alert students to the realities of readership, helping them engage an audience with clarity rather than decorating their writing with idiomatic expressions.

3. A way for academic conventions to be taught, but in relation to how they help to purposefully communicate with audience.

4. A gateway to discussion about academic literacies, allowing students to deconstruct the value systems which shape audiences' perceptions and expectations as well as ideologies which legitimate various kinds of discourse. This is a worthwhile inroad seeing that it is becoming increasingly accepted for students to be exposed to ideological matters as part of their language education.

Consequently, students will be freed to view writing as an act in which they are dealing with real people—not just text, text-types, or atomised technicalities. This is the one gem both teachers and students can value.

References

Brandt, D. (1990). *Literacy as involvement: The acts of writers, readers, and texts.* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Gerot, L. (1995). *Making sense of text: The context text relationship.* Cammeray NSW: Antipodean Educational Enterprises.

Knapp, P. (1992). *Literacy and learning programme: Resource book.* Metropolitan West Region, NSW: NSW Department of School Education.

Paltridge, B. (2000). Genre knowledge and the language learning classroom. *EA Journal, 15*(2), 52-59.

Paltridge, B. (2001). *Genre and the language learning classroom.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Prior, P. (1998). *Writing/disciplinarity: A sociohistoric account of literate activity in the academy.* London: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Lea, M. R., & Street, B. (2000). Student writing and staff feedback in higher education: An academic literacies approach. In M. R. Lea & B. Stierer (Eds.), *Student writing in higher education: New contexts* (pp. 32-46). Buckingham and Philadelphia: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Lillis, T. (2003). Student writing as 'Academic Literacies': Drawing on Bakhtin to move from critique to design. *Language and Education, 17*(3), 192-206.

U, A., Jenner, C., Devlin, G., & Grant, L. (2004). *English for academic study (business): A resource manual.* Auckland: Auckland University of Technology.

About the Author

Glenn Toh teaches English for Academic Purposes at the Auckland University of Technology. He is currently doing research on helping ESOL students with academic writing and also maintains a keen interest in current developments in language ideology and power relations.