First year students' construction of an academic identity in English as a foreign language

Construcción de la identidad académica a través del inglés como lengua extranjera en alumnos de primero

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Abstract

This paper studies the construction of an academic identity through writing in English as a foreign language, using a theoretical approach based on socio-constructivism, genre theory, systemic-functional linguistics and cultural-historical activity theory. Specifically, we study the relationship between academic genres and identity in first-year Humanities students, and to what extent a reflective social approach to writing instruction can foster students' initiation by providing spaces to analyse and discuss the nature of the academic activity system. The theoretical underpinnings present students' identity in construction as an essential element in the process of acquisition of academic genres, hence key to students' success at university, and students' identities as key elements of the academic activity system, at the same level as the other three – its communication tools, users, and goals. The theoretical framework guided the design of a course on academic English as a foreign language for first-year Humanities students at *Universitat Pompeu Fabra*. The course materials were used simultaneously as research tools to gather the data for the study, using an emic perspective as a teacher/researcher. The results show a close relationship between students' problems with the acquisition of genres in English and conflicts between their identities and other elements of the academic activity system, particularly their relation to other members and to ideational content, and hence students' inability to make relevant contributions due to problems using academic genres in English.

Key words: Academic identity, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, ACLITS, WAC/WID, activity system, academic genres, discourse communities.

Resumen

El presente artículo estudia la construcción de la identidad académica a través de la escritura en inglés como lengua extranjera, desde la base teórica del socioconstructivismo, la teoría de género, la lingüística sistémico-funcional y la teoría de actividad histórico-cultural. Concretamente, se analiza la relación entre

los géneros académicos y la identidad académica en alumnos de primero de Humanidades, y hasta qué punto un planteamiento social reflexivo de la enseñanza de la escritura contribuye a mejorar la integración de los alumnos, proveyéndoles de espacios y herramientas para el análisis del sistema de actividad académico. Conceptualizamos la identidad en construcción de los aprendices como un elemento esencial del proceso de adquisición de los géneros académicos, y por tanto clave para su permanencia en la universidad. Las identidades de los estudiantes son vistas como elementos clave del sistema de actividad académico, al mismo nivel que sus otros componentes – herramientas de comunicación, usuarios y metas. A partir de este marco, se diseñó un curso de inglés para usos académicos para alumnos de primero de Humanidades en la Universidad Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona). Los materiales del curso se usaron como herramientas para recoger datos para un estudio émico, evidenciando la relación entre los problemas de los estudiantes con la adquisición de géneros académicos en inglés y los conflictos que experimentan cuando sus propias identidades entran en contradicción con elementos del sistema, particularmente en relación con otros miembros del sistema y con el contenido del campo, lo que dificulta que los alumnos puedan construir conocimiento a través de los géneros en inglés.

Palabras clave: Identidad académica, Teoría de la Actividad Histórico-Cultural, ACLITS, WAC/WID, sistema de actividad, géneros académicos, comunidades discursivas.

Introduction

This piece of research stems from the conceptualisation of students' initiation into higher education as a never-ending process of negotiation of meaning and identity between instructors, students, and the genres that mediate the construction of knowledge and the relationships within the academic community. The theoretical framework in which this action research project is embedded borrows from genre theory (Bakhtin, 1986; Bazerman, 1994; Devitt, 1993, 1994, 1996, 2004) and systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978, 1993, 1994) for the conceptualisation of academic genres; cultural-historical activity theory for the relationship between genres, subjects and context (Leontiev, 1978; Engeström, 1995; Russell & Yáñez, 2003); and from socio-constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1985) for our views on learning and the role of genres in higher education.

Interrelations among the cited perspectives are made evident by several scholars (among others, Roth and Lee, 2007; Street, 1999, 2009, Lea & Street, 2006), pouring on foundational concepts of developmental psychology and cognition, literacy and rhetorical studies, and cultural anthropology. We'll focus successively on these strands taking into account the flow of similarities among them.

Activity Theory and CHAT

Historically linked to the work of Vygotsky, Activity Theory and Cultural Historical Activity Theory provide tools for understanding human functioning. Both approaches share a view of learning common to other learning theories within the sociocultural family: social contexts shape individuals by inserting them in social activities, and at the same time individuals continually shape and reshape contexts performing their activities. Vygotsky explained the relationship between individuals and learning by means of the semiotic mediation, mainly through the use of language signs interacting with others in the ZPD; Luria and Leontiev incorporated societal, cultural and historical

dimensions to a theory of human mental functioning, creating what is known as the second-generation activity theory.

An activity system is conceived as a system of human action upon an object in order to achieve a definite goal or outcome; it is, according to Leontiev, a social format organizing and regulating human behavior. Activities differ according to the different goals they pursue; goals experiment continuous changes along the evolving history of humankind. Therefore, activity systems are not static, but dynamic systems which are constantly re-created by micro-level interaction among their components. In fact, along with the evolving societal development, an activity system may unfold into two or more systems by opening its boundaries and losing its self-containment. Entities belonging to an activity system –objects, rules, means of production, outcomes- may be used in other activity systems in a sort of exchange. This situation gives rise to the possibility for contradictions that transcend the individual subject and its relations to other elements in the activity system (Roth & Lee, 2007).

Using activity systems, we can analyze the way in which specific tools are implemented to mediate the goals and the object (focus or problem) of a community, and how they change over time in relation to the subjects, either individuals or groups who work towards some results, while their participation in different activity systems contributes to build their social identity (Russell & Yáñez, 2003). These objects or motives are not frozen, but change and adapt through time. The existence of the objects involves the existence of some general, shared goals, which are nonetheless constantly challenged at an individual level.

From a social perspective, participating in an activity system entails one's engagement with the identity and goals of the system. New participants imitate what they perceive to be tools and forms of use, and internalize them if they perceive that they are successful employing them. Drawing from Activity Theory and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, we envision higher education as a set of interconnected activity systems. Activity theory conceptualizes the context of communication as a network of dynamic systems that are made up of human agents, goals and discourse.

In the academic context, by making explicit to students the mechanics of the community they intend to join through the study of its specific discourse patterns and their own development as members of it, we turn writing instruction into a tool of inclusion that grants first-year students prompt access to their field of knowledge as learners and active participants, challenging the power hierarchy of the academic activity systems. For novice writers, academic identity is defined by their learner status and their perception of themselves within the activity systems of higher education. Their conceptualization as academic writers depends on the relationship they perceive they have or may potentially have in the future to the goals, tools and users of the system.

Participation in the academic community requires students to a) accept the entry rules of the community, b) have their participations sanctioned by the expert members of the communities, and c) actively participate in the exchanges of the community so as to be eligible for acceptance and show adherence to the community.

Systemic functional linguistics and genre

According to the patterns of activity systems, participating in academic activities is mainly achieved through the use of language tools to fulfil the goals of the activity, following the rules established and accepted by the academic community. These rules to a certain extent are the result of a stabilisation and institutionalisation of language use in the form of genres. Nonetheless, discursive genres act as bridges between societal norms and individual options, between the social perception of genres as routinized ways of using language because of their recurrence, and the individual perception, both of the goal /object of the activity and of the discursive tools to reach it.

Bakhtin (1979) related the concept of genre to the use of language in the diverse spheres of human activity. He uses several labels to refer to these spheres, concomitant with the activity systems described in CHAT –cultural sphere, sphere of human praxis, sphere of discursive communication, determined sphere of common reality, sphere of human activity and life... As multiple and multifaceted these spheres are, so are the uses of language related to them. "Language participates of life through concrete utterances belonging to it, so as life participates of language through these utterances" (p.252). In a given situation or sphere, a speaker/writer chooses to use a given discursive genre. This election follows the consideration of the sphere of action as well as the consideration of the motives and the object of the activity, and also taking into account all the components of the situation –participants, aspects of the communicative action, etc. It is to say that the speaker's discursive intention, even being individual and subjective, adapts and follows a determined generic form. And this occurs in every communicative situation. Generic forms become as necessary as linguistic forms, and contribute to inter-comprehension in the same way as linguistic forms do. But genres guide our discursive processes because of their relationship with the sphere of action and the object of the activity, while linguistic forms only constitute an objective lexical and grammatical collection of options to be used.

Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) started using textual evidence to trace the functions genres perform, and how to reproduce them from a semiotic perspective. SFL developed a comprehensive conception of context or situation in relation to genre development, which included the notions of field, tenor and mode. These components of context determine the occurrence of concrete registers/genres.

According to Halliday (1993: 26) register/genre is a semantic and a functional concept, defined as "the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type. It is the meaning potential that is accessible in a given social context". This potential is realised by means of three functional components (Halliday, 1970) through which a text operates – the textual, interpersonal and ideational components. Halliday argued that genres are not defined by their formal qualities per se, but rather by the way such qualities relate to the contents and functions of discourse in the particular context where it commonly takes place.

The interpersonal component deals with intertextuality and the relationship between the writer and the readers. This component describes the dialogical aspects of texts, how writers speak to the audience about the text and about their relationship to it and thus establish different degrees of closeness with the community of readers. By using modality and metadiscourse, writers can tell their readers how reliable a proposition is, or their inclination towards an idea or opinion. Since academic writing deals with cognition and its limits, it is important for scholars-to-be to gain skills for engaging in remote discussions with other academic writers while clearly establishing their attitude towards their role, their readers and their statements. Modality determines the writer's relationship with the audience by taking out insurance on categorical statements, limiting such statements to conditions under which they can be regarded as objectively valid or acceptable in argument via the use of modal auxiliaries, adjectives, hedges, and such (Nash, 1990).

The ideational component covers the semantic concepts of their field-knowledge and any use of nonstandardised expressions. This component refers to the text epistemological functions, how it contributes to consolidating field knowledge by mirroring the community's background knowledge.

Finally, the textual component covers the compositional patterns of genres and any related formal features. This component shows how language structure binds together the ideational and interpersonal components (Freeman, 1981; Halliday, 1970). It designates linguistic issues – not in terms of grammatical accuracy, but rather in relation to the community's expectations on the form of a particular genre, the generic conventions and the necessary command of English to implement them – lexical items, syntactic structures and compositional patterns.

Within the specific context of an activity system, discourse genres are used as social tools that provide speakers with models of suitable responses to situations they are likely to encounter in their usual sphere of action. Discourse and context are thus bound by a mutually defining relationship, as genres build and are built by recurrent situations, facilitating the increasingly complex communication needs of the members of discourse communities by inserting discourse functions into predictable structures (Bazerman, 1995). Genres cannot exist isolated from their users and their sphere of action, because they would be unrecognisable.

Identity and learning

People's identities are networked across the activities in which they participate and are on a trajectory over time, and this needs to be taken into account both in providing opportunities for participation in educational settings, and in recognising the outcomes from educational provision... One of the outcomes from any social activity is a reconfiguration of participants' subjectivities, both individually and in relation to one another. Learning to feel differently about yourself, even to have a different sense of who you are is in itself a type of learning. In educational contexts 'learning' is not just an increase in knowledge, understanding and capability, but includes the discoursal re-construction of identity too**.** (Ivanic, 2006, p.19-20).

Along with meanings, the members of the academic activity systems also negotiate their identities within the system through the use of genres. Identity (re)construction is therefore regarded as a key element of any activity system, as it mediates the representation of users and their participations in the system. The subjects of the academic activity system are materialised into it through a series of identities or social representations that are constructed through their interactions, and hence through their use of genres. Identities –in plural– are the tools that users construct to represent themselves. Their perceptions of and contributions to the collective and individual goals of the system affect the way users perceive these identities – their roles, their status, their relationship to it, and so on. These identities, therefore, are not stable, but in a permanent state of fluctuation between different parameters, such as learner/expert or professor/researcher. A single user could then support more than one identity at the same time in order to interact in different activity systems or within the same activity system if he or she had different roles to perform in it.

When applying the concept of activity system to the context of higher education, we reject the view of academia as a single activity system, as this would overlook the multiplicity of voices, literacies, identities, and individual and collective goals present-day university comprehends. Instead, we interpret academia as a network of inter-related, sometimes overlapping and sometimes concentric activity systems, in which users may switch across groups, or participate simultaneously in different ones.

Newcomers acquire genres in different ways -by trial-and-error or by imitation, for example- as they participate in the exchanges of their activity system. As new users acquire genres, they also internalise the object/motive of the activity and the identity of the group. Since the acquisition of genres occurs dialectically, there are tensions and conflicts between the different objects, goals, tools and subjects of the multiple activity systems learners operate in when they attempt to transfer genres across different activity systems (Russell & Yáñez, 2003). For first-year students, academic identity is defined by their learner status and their perception of themselves within the activity systems of higher education. Students' self-image as academic writers depends on the relationship they perceive they have or may potentially have in the future to the goals, tools and users of the system. For learners initiated into multilingual contexts, the number of genres multiplies, and so do the conflicts between them, since generic knowledge is not transferable across contexts, disciplines or languages. In the academic context, by making explicit to students the mechanics of the community they intend to join through the study of its specific discourse patterns and their own development as members of it, we turn writing instruction into a tool of inclusion that grants first-year students prompt access to their field of knowledge as learners and active participants, challenging the power hierarchy of the academic activity systems:

> By gaining a grasp of how entire discursive systems operate through generic turns, we can locate ourselves, our potential speech acts and the criteria our utterances should seek to meet; we can start to understand what we can achieve rhetorically at any moment, and what we cannot, and how. (Bazerman, 1995, p.99).

Within a community of knowledge, authors read each other's works and respond to them unendingly, which results in the fact that all the academic texts of a field are interconnected into a knowledge network. Each text depends on the existence of many other texts, which themselves were written on the basis of former texts. Their

recurrence and index of referentiality constitute marks of status and recognition in their relation to other members of the discipline, so that they both co-operate and compete simultaneously. In the context of higher education, literacy performs three functions. Firstly, the socio-constructivist approach to education inseparably connects discourse, cognition and learning. Vygotsky (1978) viewed learning as an individual achievement that is mediated by social interaction and constructed when comprehensible meaningful discourse triggers higher mental processes. Secondly, in the current teaching practice writing is the prevailing form of evaluation, as students are required to read and write extensively across a wide range of genres and, perhaps, different languages. The focus of this paper, however, is on another function of writing, academic genres as proof of a subject's belonging to a discipline, as genres and identity are mutually constructed. The identity of academic writers is mutually dependant of their academic literacy, the genres they can employ and their impact. By displaying their knowledge of the forms, concepts and relations assigned to a certain genre, academic subjects reassert their identity as members of the group and contribute to its goals. This is a never-ending process of renegotiation of status, as "the rules of the game constantly change in response to a wide range of intellectual, material, and political forces within and outside the community" (Russell, 1991, p.14). Within the same community of knowledge, users' status are sometimes unstable – particularly for new less established members – and may fluctuate between expert and novice, as new genres emerge or change through time (Carlino, 2004).

Integrating research and instruction

By using qualitative research to analyze a group of first-year Humanities students, we attempt to provide some insights on students' initiation into higher education as a cultural phenomenon, describing students' construction of their academic identity through their writing, as their realisation of academic genres can provide clues as to their perceptions of the knowledge and the system of meanings of the academic system of activity they are about to join. Driven by our focus on the relationship between context and text, we chose to use an ethnographic approach to data gathering because it could provide an in-depth analysis of the context of particular forms of literacy Awareness of this process and its implications can make students feel more comfortable with their own struggle in seeing themselves as part of the academic activity system. Hence, we designed research tools and course materials jointly, so as to obtain as much information as possible in order to analyse students' participation in progress. This could potentially undermine the object of the analysis, as one of the problems for academic literacies researchers who are also practitioners is that being inside the system, one risks taking a subjective view on students' writing. However, the insertion of research into course design had many advantages that compensated this risk.

Firstly, it narrowed down three gaps – the gap between research and instruction, the gap between text and context/users, and the one between expert and novice writers –, contextualizing academic literacies by linking "activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help to

shape" (Barton and Hamilton 1998:6). Secondly, using compulsory and voluntary coursework rather than only voluntary activities contributed to widen the range of student types participating in the study.

In the case study, we analyse first-year Humanities students' participations in a course on English for academic purposes aimed at mainly native Catalan and Spanish speakers from Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona)[i] during the academic year 2010-11.

Course design: Identity, literacy and inclusion through reflective activities

In our vision of present-day higher education, the role of writing instructors consists of guiding students as they learn to interact with the components of the system they are attempting to join, increasing students' awareness of the nature of the system and enhancing their process of genre acquisition through opportunities to partake of interactions with other members of the field. Consequently, we abandon deficit models of teaching academic discourse (Lea & Street, 2006), breaking away from the myths of transience and transparency that blame students for their inability to write within the generic boundaries of academic communities. In practice, this goal demands a reflective social approach to writing instruction that fosters students' successful initiation into university by providing spaces to analyse and discuss the nature of the academic activity system.

In this particular case, we followed the lead of the US movement Writing in the Disciplines (also known as Writing Across the Curriculum), and its British counterpart Academic Literacies for the design of the course materials, as they both appeared in a similar context to the one we currently experienced by Catalan higher education, and they embody the principles we summarised in our theoretical framework. We have used as references the work of Lillis, Street, Lea and Ivanic for Academic Literacies; and Russell's detailed descriptions of the history of Writing Across the Curriculum[ii].

Description of course materials

The materials for the course, doubled up as research tools, were designed following the guiding principles we have described in our theoretical background:

- Literacies are multiple and changing, as they depend on the social practices of different cultural and linguistic contexts.

- Genres, goals, knowledge and identity are all mutually dependant, and they are simultaneously built in the context of the academic activity system through participation.

- The expert members of the academic activity system in charge of instructing novices should be aware of the context-specificity of genres, their mutable nature and their three-fold use for personal meaning-making, as proof of insiderdom, and as a test of belonging and knowledge of the field.

These materials for the seminars consisted of reading and writing activities to guide students' understanding and competence using academic genres, and some

reflective activities based on Academic Literacies practices that were aimed at 1) raising students' awareness of the components and mechanics of the academic activity system, 2) guiding students' analysis of written genres and how they reflect the underlying assumptions and roles of the people who use them, and 3) providing students with opportunities to critically discuss and challenge the academic status quo as new members of it[iii] – the features of genres, their transparency, identity issues, power relations, and so on. A brief description of the course activities is provided below.

Awareness activities

They start at a very basic level, with a description of the concept of activity system applied to students' context, and explicitly naming and discussing its components, taking into account students' previous background to point out elements that may be more implicit to students' conceptualisation of the academic activity system (such as the readers, the collective goals of the system, the relationship between status and genres, and such). The resources for raising students' awareness comprehend anything between the explicit teaching of what an activity system is and the components that make it up to activities in which students infer the relationships between these components out of a sample text.

Analysis activities

Students analyse academic genres and the underlying assumptions that determine their functions and features. This analysis starts at textual level, but students are requested to discuss textual features in relation to the context of use, and the power relationships and marks of status associated to them, insisting on how textual features cast an image of text authors and their perceptions of their readers, field, knowledge, and such. Language forms are therefore always connected to the knowledge and particular ways of communication of the field.

Contestation activities

The goal of such activities is to offer students opportunities for critical reading and analysis, so that they can challenge the prescriptive view on specific genres as permanent, correct or transparent. These activities connect language with what individuals do, exploring the connections between the implicit assumptions on language made by individuals and social institutions, and to what extent "by engaging in an existing practice we are maintaining a particular type of representational resource; by drawing on a particular type of representational resource, we are maintaining a particular type of social practice" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p.12).

The categorisation of these kinds of activities is not strict, however, as there are no clear-cut limits between the goals we have set for each type of activity in the sense that activities aimed at, for example, raising awareness, are intrinsically connected to analysis and contestation. In terms of goals, therefore, rather than a hierarchical

classification, we find a continuum that mirrors students' gradual understanding of the nature of the academic activity system and their subsequent critical attitude towards some of its aspects as full active members of it.

	Description of the reflective activities	*Aspect*	*Goal*	*Data gathered*
S E S S I O N 1	**Class discussion** • Collaboratively, whole group. • Teacher-guided discussion on what it means to be a member of the Humanities, students' perceptions of their first-year, their problems, good points, and such.	All	Awareness	-
	Questionnaire • Collaboratively, in pairs. • Students answer ten questions on the components of the activity system of the Humanities and their perceptions of their role within it.	All	Awareness	60 questionnaires (at least 120 students).
S E S S I O N 2	**Class discussion** • Collaboratively, first in pairs and then with the group. • Students debate the difficulties they experience when writing in L1 and in L2, and attempt to see them from their teachers' perspective and find a way to fix them.	Genres	Awareness	List of difficulties for 4 seminar groups (about 60 students).
	Online forum • Collaboratively, in the virtual learning environment. • Students list the differences between Continental and Anglo-American writing conventions by picking items from a list of descriptors.	Genres	Analysis	13 entries (13 students).
S E S S I O N 3	**Class discussion** • Collaboratively, first in pairs and then with the group. • Students discuss individual and collective goals within the academia.	Goals Users	Awareness Contestation	About 60 students.
	Online survey • Individually, in the virtual learning environment. • Students pick the problems they frequently experience when using academic genres in L1 or L2.	Genres	Awareness	4 participations (4 students).
	Online forum • Collaboratively, in the virtual learning environment. • Students discuss their frequent problems when writing in L1 and L2, their most likely causes in relation to the components of the academic activity system, and possible solutions.	Genres	Awareness Contestation	12 entries (12 students).
S E S S I O	**Class discussion** • Collaboratively, in pairs and then with the group. • Students list the functions of genres in the Humanities, and how they relate to other components of the academic activity system.	All	Awareness	About 60 students.
	Online forum	Genres	Awareness	9 entries (9

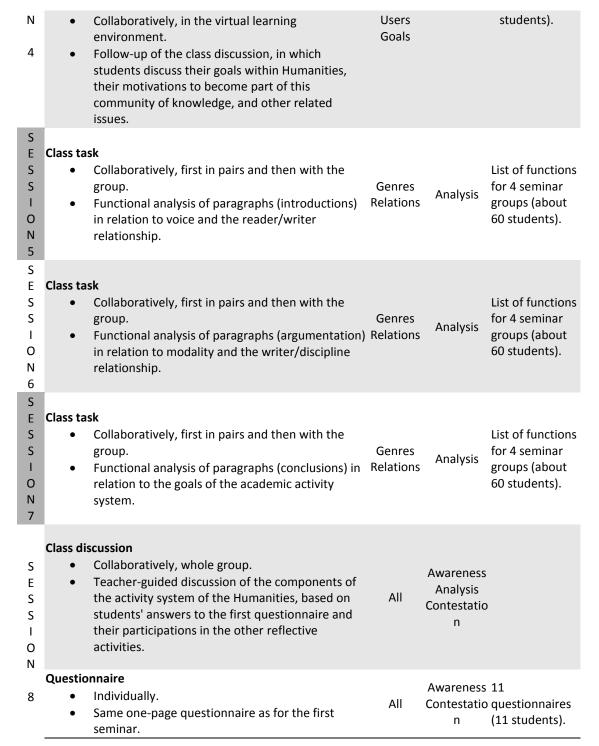|			
N 4	• Collaboratively, in the virtual learning environment. • Follow-up of the class discussion, in which students discuss their goals within Humanities, their motivations to become part of this community of knowledge, and other related issues.	Users Goals	students).
S E S S I O N 5	**Class task** • Collaboratively, first in pairs and then with the group. • Functional analysis of paragraphs (introductions) in relation to voice and the reader/writer relationship.	Genres Relations	Analysis	List of functions for 4 seminar groups (about 60 students).
S E S S I O N 6	**Class task** • Collaboratively, first in pairs and then with the group. • Functional analysis of paragraphs (argumentation) in relation to modality and the writer/discipline relationship.	Genres Relations	Analysis	List of functions for 4 seminar groups (about 60 students).
S E S S I O N 7	**Class task** • Collaboratively, first in pairs and then with the group. • Functional analysis of paragraphs (conclusions) in relation to the goals of the academic activity system.	Genres Relations	Analysis	List of functions for 4 seminar groups (about 60 students).
S E S S I O N 8	**Class discussion** • Collaboratively, whole group. • Teacher-guided discussion of the components of the activity system of the Humanities, based on students' answers to the first questionnaire and their participations in the other reflective activities.	All	Awareness Analysis Contestation
	Questionnaire • Individually. • Same one-page questionnaire as for the first seminar.	All	Awareness Contestation	11 questionnaires (11 students).

Table n. 1. List of reflective activities/research tools.

Table 1 sums up the reflective activities for each session. The first column contains session numbers, one to eight. The second column contains the list of activities by type: class discussion or task, questionnaires, online forums or surveys; and it provides a brief description of each activity and the interaction patterns it entails (collaborative or individual). The third column lists what components of the academic activity system the reflective activity deals with, either genres, goals, users, relationships, or all of them. The fourth column displays the goals for each activity –

raising awareness, enabling analysis or promoting contestation, as discussed in the previous paragraphs. The last column lists the data gathered by means of each activity, and hence the number of students who took part in each one.

Example of an activity

As an illustration of the methods we used during the seminars, we shall briefly describe the reflective activity we used in seminar number five. The goal for this seminar was to engage students into the analysis of the textual marks of voice and writer/reader relationships in academic genres based on the study of introductory paragraphs. At the start of the lesson, the seminar instructor introduces the notion of discourse as social action, using everyday examples. The seminar instructor asks students to list the functions of sentences in introductory paragraphs, based on their own experience. The list is written down on the board, and rephrased collaboratively. Using this list, students analyse in pairs the functions of sentences in a paragraph. After a while, the seminar instructor conducts students' discussion of what function is performed by each sentence, and what resources the author has used to achieve it.

Focus	*One of the functions of a sentence in an introduction is...*
Ideational component	• To present the topic and point of view. • To explain information. • To contain the main ideas of the text. • To state your thesis.
Textual component	• To state the problem/issue to be discussed. • To describe text organisation. • To go from general to specific. • To be a summarised version of the whole paper.
Interpersonal component	• To help the audience understand the text. • To get the audience interested. • To give you the main idea of the text and the general topic. • To be very reader-focused.

Table n. 2. Students' list of functions as gathered in session 5.

The combined list of functions for introductory paragraphs students contributed is displayed in table number 2, in which items are arranged according to Halliday's functional components of discourse. After writing the list on the board, the seminar instructor asked students to connect these items to one or more of the components of academic activity systems, in order to increase their awareness of the connections between genres and all the other components (subjects, identities, goals, results). At the end of the class, the seminar instructor asks students to guess the status of the author of the text, and justify their decision based on the paragraph itself, exploring the textual realisations of status and identity in genres, and challenging some of their assumptions about the role of novices and experts3. The ultimate goal of these tasks is to enable students to articulate the conceptions of genres, making explicit what was implicit: their views of themselves as members of the Humanities, and how challenged they feel by expert genres and status.

Research outcomes: Identities in conflict

The data gathered along the seminars in the course have a rather limited impact due to the large number of students enrolled in the subject who did not attend the seminars, as shown in table 1 when comparing the number of questionnaires obtained in the first and last seminar sessions, sixty and eleven respectively. The reasons for the high rate of absenteeism are mainly connected to the students' level of English. Some students could skip the course by producing a language certificate, so the most language-proficient students disappeared from the course after the third week. In addition, many of the students who had never studied English before or who felt they had a very low level either did not attend at all or dropped out after the first assignments. Consequently, the number of students' contributions is too low to draw general conclusions as to the efficacy of the materials.

In spite of the lack of data coming out of the questionnaires, discussions and participation in the reflective activities we described above, either in class setting or in online forums, offer some insights into the students' evolving awareness of their position in academic activity systems, though conflicts and tensions derived of their English proficiency may have blurred their own vision as new members of the Humanities academic activities.

Through the analysis of students' participation we constructed a picture of students' relationship to the components of the academic activity system as mediated by Anglo-American academic genres (Rienecker & Stray, 2003). The results show a close relationship between students' problems with the acquisition of academic genres in English and conflicts between their newly constructed identities and other elements of the academic activity system, particularly their relation to the other members of the academic activity system and to its ideational content, and hence students' insecurity to make a relevant contribution due to their problems using academic genres in a foreign language.

Faced with a writing task in English, students struggled between their will to create and their will to communicate, a conflict that challenged their still vulnerable academic persona. Their wish to contribute was still strongly individualistic, rather a personal challenge than a contribution to collective goals. Students felt that they needed to assert the legitimacy of their belonging to the academic activity system, which depended solely on their ability to articulate their contributions in an academic manner and submit them to the approval of an audience superior in status to them. In this respect, academic socialisation overlaps first-year students' entrance into maturity and their reach for new more powerful and independent roles. Because of their acute perceptions of status and the power relations their own novice status entails, students are not interested in constructing knowledge with their peers, who are in the same precarious position as they are and competing for the same posts. At the initiation stage, students do not view the social construction of knowledge within their discipline as a feasible goal due to their problems dealing with materials by other authors, and because at this point reasserting their academic identities is much more important as an individual goal than the collective goals and patterns of interaction established by the community.

Students' initial attitude towards academic genres in English is rather negative, due to their perception of the level of formality that these genres demand, their objective structure that feels very complicated, uncomfortable"[iv]. However, explicit teaching and discussion of the nature of the academic activity system made students aware of other levels of difficulties besides their foreign language skills. After the seminar sessions, and as shown in the materials gathered using the reflective activities, students' trouble understanding and producing such genres was no longer purely linguistic, but also determined by cultural differences, problems finding an audience, lack of content and procedural knowledge, issues of status and identity, and their relationship to the other components of the academic activity system.

The students' need to translate and to use a dictionary openly refer to their lack of proficiency in English. Thinking in English is equated here to thinking in a different kind of way, rather than in a different language, a way that students find so challenging that they resort to "cheating" in order to regain control of their voices. The following quote from the forum on students' difficulties writing academic genres illustrates students' ambivalence between their focus on their language difficulties and the hints at other issues (the italics are ours):

> It's very difficult to change our way of thinking. Normally when I write an assignment I start writing in English, but then I forget a lot of things that I wanted to write, therefore I first write in Spanish or Catalan and then I translate to English. Well, I know it's wrong, but if I write directly in English, I can't control my ideas. I need to have a plan with what I want to say and then I put on the paper in English. Oh! and always with my dictionary next to me.

When asked to reflect on their problems with academic genres, students realised that they lacked control over contents, form, audience and reception. Even though this lack of control existed in other subjects too, it was exposed even more clearly by their deficiencies writing in English, and because of the different planning and writing processes Anglo-American writing requires from them. In the same forum, another student compared the cognitive processes to the discursive ones. The cognitive processes described in the quote (marked in italics) correspond to students' description of academic genres in their L1. From students' point of view, cognition is a deeply subjective chaotic lonely process, in contrast to the required linear structure and accountability of academic genres:

> From my point of view, the main source of the problems we experience when we write an academic paper is the difference between mental structure and discursive one. On one hand, mental structure is not linear: it does not use discursive arguments and it presupposes a lot of things because the subject is the only one who works with it. Besides, it employs many digressions, excursions and associations with memories and other mental issues.

As a consequence, students' still half-constructed academic identity was undermined by their inability to communicate transparently using academic genres in English. In students' view, the foreign language problem was materialised in their frequent grammatical and lexical errors, even though these accounted for 10% of their grade in written assignments. Thus, students initially argued that they were able to use academic genres in their native tongue, even though when asked explicitly about their problems they listed the same issues for genres in both languages. This contradiction

may reflect students' reluctance to admit to deeper problems with genres beyond spelling or language accuracy, since admitting to other issues may indicate they are not suitable to join the academic community.

Students' relationship to the genres used in the academic context is extremely complex because genres materialise students' relationship to the components of the academic activity system they are attempting to join. By gaining a deeper understanding of how to use generic tools to interact in the system, students gain more control of the image they project and their relationship to the ideational contents of the Humanities and other members of the system. Students' insecurities with the foreign language and the increasing pressure on new students to solve their writing issues outside the system can only prevent students and faculty from seeing the deepest issues that undermine students' successful entrance into the academic system. Students' self-image, their career and their successful access and interaction in the academic community can be negatively affected by their need to fit apparently contradictory academic identities for different disciplines and languages, and by students' lack of awareness of the role of writing in the construction and development of an academic persona in their first language and in English. By the end of the term, however, some students had a more hopeful view of their chances to participate in the academic community through genres in English. As a token of this attitude change, when asked about what it felt like to be a member of the Humanities in the questionnaire for seminar 8, one of the students replied: "I feel like a beginner in all the areas, but I have in my hands the opportunity to discover a lot of ideas[v]".

Conclusions

The course materials exposed a strong connection between students' problems acquiring academic genres and the conflicts derived from the construction of their academic identity in relation to the components of the academic activity system. Explicit discussion of this process helped students become aware of the elements that make up the academic activity system and their relationship to themselves, improving their perception of the role of academic genres in English by denying their transparency and exposing students' difficulties, thus changing their focus from language to contents, and from the textual features of genres to goals, functions and relationships.

Students' struggle with the acquisition of academic genres should not be regarded from a purely textual point of view, as it is embedded in the conflicts derived from their process of initiation into the academic activity system. Students' construction of their identity as members of the academic field is mutually dependent on their relationship to the novice and expert members of the academy, to its contents and its goals, and to the tools used to interact, mark one's status, initiate new members and negotiate the goals of the academic activity system[vi].

By incorporating the findings of research on literacies and instruction, we can abandon deficit models of teaching academic discourse to offer more students the opportunity of contributing to the knowledge community. Learning from research can

help writing instructors to guide students as they learn to interact with the components of the system they are attempting to join, thus enriching their process of genre acquisition and awareness with the opportunity to partake of its interactions. Initiation becomes a process of negotiation of identity and meaning between instructors, students, and the texts that mediate the construction of knowledge and the relationships in the academic community.

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Notes

[i] You may read more about Universitat Pompeu Fabra and its language policies at www.upf.edu, available in Catalan, Spanish and English.

[ii] For further information on these two trends, Russell, Lea, Parker, Street & Donahue (2009) described and compared them.

[iii] The course materials combined genres written by expert authors (canonically written or not) and novice authors (mainly previous students of the subject).

[iv] Both quoted from seminar 1 questionnaire.

[v] Quoted from the questionnaire from seminar 8.

[vi] According to Ivanic (2004:20), "the capacity to examine critically their own processes of identification gives people agency and control over the contribution they are making to the circulation discourses, and ultimately to the potential transformation of their social world."

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