Teaching Academic Writing in English at Arab Universities: Considering the Contexts

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Abstract: *Academic writing has been a contested area of tertiary English-language education throughout the world. At universities in Arabic-speaking countries, where English is studied as a foreign language, there is a tendency to accept pedagogical theories and practices developed elsewhere, particularly in first- and second-language environments. The unique position of academic writing at Arab universities is first examined by focusing on the perspective of two communicative contexts: the speech community (where Arabic is the main language) and the discourse community (in which the novice student is supposed to be "conversing" with international scholars). Anomalies concerning misconceptions about these contexts and the relations between them are then considered in regard to three areas of conflict: between reading and writing, Arabic and English, and skills and content. On the basis of experience and examples, mainly from Qatar and Oman, it is argued that closer integration is required in each case, which involves changes in teaching programs and administrative structures. Bringing together areas of study that have tended to remain separate can result in what has been termed a "pedagogy of possibility", one that makes the teaching of academic writing more responsive to the needs of both speech and discourse communities.*

1. Approaches to academic writing

Academic writing features in the curriculum of most English departments at Arab universities. In these courses, students are required to select a topic and to prove a thesis by undertaking research and citing sources of information. But this area of study has been contested with regard to not only its requirements (Spack 1988) and standards (Paltridge 2004) but also its ontological status (Elbow 1991). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that its pedagogy too has been frequently debated. In considering a number of alternatives, Dowst (1980), for example, in reaction against traditional ways of teaching writing, favors an *epistemic* approach, in which language serves as a means of knowing the world, over formal, referential, expressive, and rhetorical methods.

In reaction against pedagogy based on structural patterns, Shih (1986) recommends three "orientations": *functional* (in which purpose and audience are paramount), *process-centered* (in which several drafts of an essay are monitored), and *content-based* (in which writing is about other texts). Raimes (1991) provides a diachronic survey of the development of traditions in teaching academic writing since the 1960s. First there was a focus on *forms* (sentence

structure, cohesion, topic sentences, organization). Then, attention was given to *writers*, what they need to do to "make meaning". The next stage was a shift to *content* and a consideration of requirements of other disciplines. More recently, focus has been placed on *readers* and their expectations. A consequence of this last approach is the socialization of writers into communities of readers, a process the present article will explore.

Discussions and analyses of academic writing in English have been conducted largely on the basis of experience with either first-language (EL1) or second-language (ESL) speakers studying in a first-language environment. When applied uncritically in Arab universities, where students are studying English as a *foreign* language (EFL), adopting some of the approaches used elsewhere has contributed to a gap between expectation and reality. Consequently, there can be confusion and insecurity among both teachers and students. On the other hand, most academics would distinguish between the kind of writing—and the kind of thinking—that goes on, or should go on, in a university and what sometimes happens outside it. Thus, an effective pedagogy should take into account requirements relating to both the distinct position of Arab EFL students and the nature of university study.

In concluding his survey of scholarship in the field, Paltridge (2004:98) sums up the ideal aims of an academic writing course:

Teaching academic writing should give students skills to ask questions of texts they are required to produce, of the contexts the texts are located in, and the people who will be reading and judging the effectiveness of their [students'] texts.

The key terms in this formulation are *questions* (suggesting the give and take of interactive communication), *context* (the relevant factors in the environment in which communication is conducted), and *people* (the parties involved). The first and last of these, as will be shown, can be subsumed under a more general notion of *context*. This article will attempt to show how a consideration of context in this sense can help clarify the particular nature of academic writing in English at Arab universities and lead to more effective teaching.

2. Aspects of context

Context is a central concern of Pragmatics and its pedagogical offspring Communicative Language Teaching. There are at least three kinds of language context: (i) textual, (ii) situational, and (iii) discourse. These relate respectively to other language in a text, conditions surrounding a communicative event, and interaction between participants. The term *co-text* has been used (Widdowson 2004; Crystal 2006:114) to designate the use of language before and after a unit of text. Brown and Yule (1983) show how interpretation is "forcibly constrained" by preceding co-text, even when there is no overt reference (p. 46). It has also been illustrated (Widdowson1984:87ff) how at every point a text is always looking forward to what comes next; written texts raise questions and hypotheses in readers' minds that are then tested. Thus, a successful writer

negotiates with readers both anaphorically and cataphorically. Much writing instruction is concerned with co-textual features that make an essay more accessible to readers, at both lower (vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation) and higher (organization, logical development, cohesion) levels.

Situational context relates to "features of the non-linguistic world in relation to which linguistic units are systematically used" (Crystal 2006:104). This includes, for particular communicative events, such factors as the addressor-addressee relationship, topic, setting, channel, code, genre, and purpose (Brown and Yule 1983; Swales 1990). A pedagogical problem in considering such components is that they can be trivially construed unless the precise contributions of each are specified and analyzed. What is significant in a situational context is how features of the environment generate formal choices and how these choices are deemed to be appropriate by participants. For this reason, Widdowson (2004:42-43), following Sperber and Wilson 1995), views situational context as a "psychological construct" in which relevant aspects of the real world are "cognitively abstracted" in language use.

Thus, both co-text and situational context require interaction between writer and reader. This dimension of context relates to the concept of *discourse*, as is emphasized in Levinson's (1983:284) conversational paradigm for all communication. When academic writing is viewed as similar to conversation, its functions are seen to include exchange, negotiation, development, expansion, and critique—not merely reproduction—of meaning. Thus, readers and writers are not autonomous but mutually dependent. Moreover, this perspective suggests that the unique position of academic writers—and a source of their difficulty—is engagement in two directions. On one hand, they are "conversing" with other texts and reaching a synthesis in which what they have read is filtered through their understanding and concerns. But they are also engaged with their own readers' prior knowledge, experience, interests, attitudes, and purposes. They must predict these readers' possible reactions and design their text to take such factors into account. Academic writers, then, are engaged in two simultaneous discourses. Unlike participants in conversation, though, readers and writers need to imagine their interlocutors, who are not physically present, Considering academic writing as conversation can help to clarify its contexts by "treat[ing] discourse and the real-life world as intertwined realities" (Phelps 1998:54).

3. Speech communities and discourse communities
The discourse contexts of academic writing at Arab universities are complex. To analyze them, we need to ask who the participants are. The answer to this question involves a change in perspective from communicative theory to the sociolinguistic concepts of *speech* and *discourse communities*.

3.1. The speech community
The notion of speech community applies not only to social groups that share a language but also to those in which more than one language is used and whose members frequently interact (Scherre 2006). In multilingual speech

communities, although speakers have different first-languages, they are mutually intelligible, agree on what is appropriate, and share a repertoire of possibilities across languages. Such speakers operate within a superordinate system where separate languages can have discrete functions. In these circumstances, individual languages can be perceived as constituents of a third code. Just as a member of a monolingual speech community varies styles or registers, so a speaker in a multilingual speech community may achieve similar results by moving from one language to another, as happens in code-switching, a phenomenon that has been analyzed with regard to Arabic and English use among university students in Iraq (Sallo 1992).

The role of English in the superordinate systems of speech communities in the Arab world is changing, and it varies among countries. For example, English-language newspapers in Qatar, originally intended for expatriates, are increasingly being read by Qataris (Moody 2007b), probably as a result of the emphasis on English in education. In the Arabian Gulf generally, where there is a rich mix of languages, English is becoming a lingua franca. This has been attributed in part to large numbers of expatriate workers, estimated by Karmani (2005:90) to be eleven million, most of whom are from the Indian subcontinent and other countries in the Arab world that use various dialects of Arabic.

These Gulf societies belong to Saville-Troike's (2006:16) "soft-shelled" communities, in which one of the main world languages (English) is used, in contrast to "hard-shelled" communities where "minority" languages are both first and other languages. In the former, interaction across language boundaries is relatively easy, and therefore more individuals gain access to membership. The language situation in Oman is especially complex because many citizens have a first language other than Arabic, and hence there is a greater need to use additional languages for wider communication (Al Busaidi 1995). But throughout the Arab world not only is English becoming a semi-official "high" code in education, bureaucracy, and the workplace, but also—even in those countries where Arabic is universally a first-language—English is developing "low" or vernacular functions, as the example of code switching in Iraq suggests. (For explanation of the terms *high* and *low*, see, for example, Sridhar 1996.)

A consideration of speech community permits us to consider aspects of both co-text and context of situation against the background of codes and conventions of the society in which discourse occurs. In Arab university English classes, it is easy to ignore such factors. Often there is an implicit assumption that students are (or ought to be) engaged in communicative acts similar to those of EL1 academic writers. Nothing undermines EFL students' ability more than measuring their success by how well they conform to standards of successful academic essays in an EL1 speech community. The problem is exacerbated when, as often happens, textbooks are used in these classes intended for either EL1 or ESL students wishing to integrate into an EL1 community—foreign students studying in the USA, for example (Moody 2009).

3.2. The discourse community

Particular communicative events occur in groups smaller than speech communities, ones that share unique goals, purposes, and conventions (Borg 2003). We are born into a speech community, but we must be educated to participate in these other, more specialized groups. Thus, the term *discourse community* has been adopted, mainly by educationalists concerned with imparting skills required for such communication. An academic discourse community consists of the interaction between practitioners in a discipline who subscribe to its practices. The idea of discourse community has been central in considerations of academic writing (for example, Spack 1988; Swales 1990; Johns 1997; Paltridge 2004). Furthermore, Spack (1988), Connor (1996), Johns (1997), Matalene (2001), and Borg (2003) all report on the complicated process students go through to become members of academic discourse communities.

A discourse community may not fall under an umbrella speech community. As Swales (1990:29) notes, discourse communities can exist independently of speech communities, as when academics in diverse speech communities communicate internationally with one another. Conventions may differ between speech and discourse communities. For example, whereas the unacknowledged use of texts by other writers is acceptable practice for many purposes in speech communities, it is considered a serious infringement of the conventions of academic discourse communities and designated pejoratively as plagiarism (Howard 1999; Leki 2006).

Many attempts have been made to specify the features of academic discourse. Johns (1997:58ff), for example, has itemized them as explicit vocabulary, limited topic, focused argument, supportive data, cohesive "signposts", distance between writer and reader, absence of emotion, a guarded stance, a shared vision of reality, assertion of authority relations, acknowledgement of intertextuality through citation, and compliance with genre requirements. Fakri (2009:318), in an investigation of how Arabic-speaking academics often depart from some of these conventional practices, still accepts their rationale because they permit scholars, "notwithstanding their cultural background and modus operandi … to benefit from each other's research and appreciate each other's contribution to knowledge creation".

However, generalizations about the academic discourse community have been questioned in several ways. First, the idea of a monolithic entity is likely to be an oversimplification insofar as each discipline has its own conventions (Paltridge 2004). This has led to Johns' (1997) coining the term *academic literacies*, to Leki's (2006) encouraging the teacher of academic writing to acknowledge variable conventions across disciplines, and to Spack's (1988) recommendation that teaching academic writing should be the concern of individual disciplines. Second, it may be unproductive to identify professional academics and students as belonging to the same discourse community since their abilities and needs differ (Grabe 2001). Third, some commonly held assumptions may be mistaken. In reacting to the requirement that academic writing be "decontextualized", Sinclair (1993) shows how it is always firmly

grounded in particular situational contexts. Cazden (1985), objects to "the myth of the autonomous text" and attributes it to academics' impossible desire to appear to be objective and free of local contexts.

Academic writing conventions change. The belief that they reflect fixed principles of logic has been questioned by Atkinson (1991:335) who traces the roots of English academic prose to the seventeenth century, when locutions of upper-class speech were adopted as "a rhetoric of immediate experience" to replace methods of Aristotelian scholasticism. Today, the idea of what is appropriate may be shifting again. The fact that academic discourse communities have moved to cyberspace and accepted new practices in email and texting has led to changes in syntax and lexis and also to new rhetorical patterns, ideas of authorship and principles of attribution (Canagarajah 2002a:96). And phenomena such as hypertexts and websites like Wikipedia have challenged the notion that a text is ever completed or the property of an individual scholar (Murray 2000).

4. Tensions between speech and discourse communities

The cleavage between speech and discourse communities is widening throughout the world. Even in EL1 speech communities, academic discourse can seem obscure and alienating (Geisler 1994). Fabricant (2009) acknowledges that although it would be impossible to deal with complex ideas without "shorthand" ways of referring to them" (para. 3), academics should ask a pragmatic question: "Is the added precision I would gain in using … an unusual term [one likely to be unfamiliar to members of the speech community] worth the resulting loss of simplicity?" (para. 9). This dilemma is exacerbated for EFL writers. In an EL1 context, there is at least some degree of overlap between the two communities—for example, in what counts as a formal style, a reasoned argument, a rhetorical pattern. EL1 academic writers cannot reach every member of their speech community, but EFL writers in multilingual societies may be communicating with none or very few. In Arab universities if EL1 conventions are upheld, the discourse community for academic writing in English may be limited to the English instructor. This makes little sense if one reason for teaching it is "initiation" (Bizzel 1982; Spack 1988) into a discourse community outside the classroom.

While academics need to engage in communication with other specialists, it is equally necessary to bring speech and discourse communities closer together (Bizzell 1982; Kachru 1985; Canagarajah 2002a). Bizzell (1982:193) points to a failure in pedagogy to examine connections between them. In defending the teaching of EL1 academic writing, she perhaps unwittingly suggests a reason to rethink their relationship: "…[I]f the writing process is understood in terms of a universalist model, students who do not match it risk *being seen* as cognitively deficient" (205), italics added. The use of the conditional and the gerund here suggests that the rationale for teaching academic writing is to give the appearance that one is intelligent, implying that such conventions are cosmetic, used for their own sake, not because they

promote socially or intellectually valuable discussion. Elbow (1991:150) makes a more direct attack when he claims, "No one [in academe] seems to defend the stylistic conventions [of academic writing] themselves—merely the pragmatic need for them".

Should academic conventions be challenged? B. Kachru (1985) believes standards are now out of EL1 speakers' control and in the hands of members of the "outer" and "expanding" circles of ESL and EFL users. Canagarajah (2002a) recommends that EFL students have a right and a responsibility to question current practices on the basis of conventions in their local speech communities. Kramsch (1993:244) outlines a "critical language pedagogy" for ESL/EFL, in which awareness of global context goes hand in hand with local knowledge and requirements. Kramsch is concerned with teachers, but students too should adopt a similar perspective by taking cognizance of their local speech communities in several ways. They should view it initially as the milieu in which they have developed their own language skills. Arab students' articulated awareness of the nature of their multilingual speech communities will help them to focus on how its practices contrast with those of the (English language) academic discourse community they are trying to enter. They should distinguish between the two, not in order to denigrate the former and valorize the latter, but to develop abilities required for full membership in each and a flexibility to move between them.

At the same time, students have a role to play in narrowing the gap between the two communities. In published scholarship on the pedagogy of academic writing, speech communities have received less attention than discourse communities. This has obscured differences between EL1, ESL, and EFL users' needs. If academic discourse is conducted on exclusively foreign models, it risks not being "heard" and "conversed with" by the speech communities that might benefit most from it. To adapt Kramsch's (1993:256) term, what needs to be created is a "third place", one that manipulates the larger "hegemonic" structures (in this case, those of the international discourse community) but at the same time preserves the local styles, purposes, interests and needs of speech communities. In this way, "the foreign language is appropriated by learners to fulfill local needs".

5. The "appropriation" of academic writing in Arab universities
How can academic writing in English be "appropriated" by local speech communities while simultaneously retaining its value and identity in an international discourse community? This is a crucial question for universities in the Arab world. Its answer requires a consideration of links between old and new knowledge, textual information and personal experience, academic and social concerns, research procedures and logical reasoning. Where there could be integration, there has often been conflict, with the result that speech and discourse communities have moved further apart. Three conflicts seem especially significant: reading vs. writing, Arabic vs. English, and skills vs. content. They will now be addressed in relation to classroom practice and

administrative structures, and some suggestions will be made for ways of resolving them.

5.1. Reading and writing

Surveys of reading habits in Qatar (Moody 2007a) and informal investigations in Oman show that, with the exception of the internet, university students read little English outside their course work. When instructors complain that students "lack experience", they are probably referring to what could be gained from reading in English. For example, students often have problems finding topics for research projects when instructed to select one that reflects their interests. Sometimes they ask the instructor to choose for them, or they use topics they or other students have written on previously, rather than ones with which they are genuinely involved. What initially appears to be a paradoxical rejection of freedom is likely related to the fact that students do not develop their interests through reading in English.

This failure is strengthened by tendencies in English departments to offer separate courses in reading and writing. But it needs to be recognized that in both students engage in the same kind of communicative act. Reading and writing are complementary activities in a dynamic system (Phelps 1998). No one can write well who does not read widely. Reading affects writing at every level, from spelling and vocabulary through to organization and thesis development. One implication of this interdependence is that without reading examples of the kinds of essays they are expected to produce, students will not know how to engage in academic writing themselves. Thus, it is advisable to collect well-written examples of students' work from previous years and make it available for study and discussion.

The imaginary conversations of students with source texts and with their own readers eventually become components of a single discourse. The essay produced should be a continuation of the communication that has been conducted through reading sources (Spack 1988). The conventions of referencing and citation, then, are not merely extra refinements but serve the communicative purpose of identifying the interlocutors with whom discourse has taken place. Similarly, a student's essay needs to be seen as a contribution to a continuing discussion in the discourse community. Students should consider that what they have written might, in future, engage other readers in an interaction similar to their own use of source texts. Thus, if students write on topics previous students have used, then they are responsible for building on what has already been said.

Often students fail to perceive the "contextually determined" nature of meaning (Sinclair 1993:552). Most texts in English in libraries and on the internet are not intended for Arabs but have been written by and for members of an EL1 speech community. Readers from outside this community, then, are cast in a role similar to that of a conversational eavesdropper. Students' failure to recognize their position as readers can result in frustration. They may attribute comprehension difficulties to a deficiency in language skills such as vocabulary

or grammar. But the real problem is often a lack of knowledge about the contexts of communication and how writers assume communities of readers. For example, when they cannot understand texts intended for advanced scholars, students waste time attempting to read them. Sometimes in their essays they refer to concepts they do not understand but which the original writer has assumed a fellow specialist would find familiar. An uncritical attempt to identify with the intended reader of a source text can also lead to statements such as one from a student's essay that said the painting of the Mona Lisa was an important aspect of "our" culture—a pronoun she had probably repeated from the internet without considering to whom it referred.

A pedagogy of academic writing should attempt to show readers how to engage with the speech and discourse communities in which their source texts have been written. Students need to assess whether they are the intended reader and, if they are not, to take appropriate action. They should position themselves in relation to a text and to understand how to respond to it. They need to acquire the ability to find and select source materials which are appropriate and which they can comprehend, and to assess whether a text should be abandoned altogether or whether it is worthwhile trying to acquire the necessary knowledge to make sense of it.

Student writers continue this process in negotiating with their own readers. In addressing them, they develop, criticize, and/or reject what other writers have said. They take existing scholarship and connect it to data, observations, and experience from their communities. Academic writing usually involves restructuring knowledge rather than creating it in the usual sense (Howard 1999). What is original often lies in how ideas of previous writers are questioned and applied. Thus, an apparently irrelevant source may turn out to be appropriate in the framework of a new argument. In Arab universities, much research and academic writing consist of relating theories developed elsewhere to local issues. In terms of the conversational paradigm, this means communicating critically with members of an international discourse community in order to assess the value of scholarship to a local speech community.

This process is threatened at every stage. Just as it is easy for students to believe they are the readers whom writers of source texts have in mind, so also they may want in their own essay to continue a dialogue in terms these other writers have set up. When this happens, their writing becomes deficient in two ways. If they do not apply what their sources say to their own situation, they are not engaging in critical debate and hence are neglecting their duty as members of an academic discourse community. Also, if they do not address their speech community (with suggestions, recommendations, conclusions) in terms that can be understood, their essay is inadequate for that community too. Fulfilling this double responsibility is not easy. It involves communicating in two directions: making sense of sources (often products of foreign communities), and presenting a synthesis in the form of a new argument (which, while following the conventions of academic discourse, is locally accessible).

5.2. Arabic and English

If the speech community is significant for academic writing, then obviously Arabic, as its major component, is too. Yet the role of Arabic is often neglected in English classes. It is an anomaly, for example, that when students are asked to write on a topic of relevance to their society, they are at the same time restricted to finding and using sources in English only. Such requirements contribute to the gulf between academic writing and social reality. Raimes (1991) distinguishes between "real" writing and the "display" writing students produce for examinations and assessment. To neglect the speech community by ignoring Arabic tends to make the texts students produce into artificial "display".

When Arabic is considered at all, it is usually viewed negatively as "interference". Students' first languages have featured in discussions of ESL and EFL writing mainly in terms of *contrastive rhetoric* (see Connor 1996, 2002), a field of study that "examines differences and similarities in writing across cultures" (Connor 2002:493). There are many accounts of variations between patterns of organization and argument in Arabic and English. Following is a list of some of the ways written Arabic rhetorical practices have been said to carry over into student writing in English:

- Grammatical parallelism and coordination instead of subordination (Al Jubouri 1984; Silva 1993; Connor 1996; Mohamed and Omer 2002; Fakhri 2009)
- A tendency to use phatic communication, less defining and exemplifying (Silva 1993)
- Loose structure (Conner 1993)
- Restatement instead of development of ideas (Silva 1993)
- Repetition of synonyms (Fakhri 2009)
- Repetition of morphemes, word strings, and "chunks" (Al Jubouri 1984)
- Lack of explicit formal closure (Silva 1993)
- Conventions in paragraphing (Williams 1984, Silva 1993; Hasam and Scholfield 2007)
- Lack of attention to revision (Hasam and Scholfield 2007)
- Different use of cohesive links (Holes 1984, Williams 1984)
- Inclusion of information an English reader would consider obvious (Silva 1993)
- Appeal to authority more than to reason (Connor 1996)
- Generalized rather than specific referencing (Mohamed and Omer 2000)
- More tolerance of ambiguity and imprecision (Mohamed and Omer 2000)

Hatim (1991, 1997) argues that these tendencies are less inherent features of Arabic itself than the results of cultural and sociopolitical influences on language use. It follows, then, that when they occur they are formal realizations of context, rather than determined by the linguistic system of Arabic. As such, they should be approached pedagogically in ways similar to other contextual factors. If students are using elements of Arabic rhetoric in writing English, teachers need to know this, but such information should be seen in a positive

light (Raimes 1991). Teachers might more profitably consider them as inappropriate rather than as incorrect in students' essays. In addition, Leki (1991:138) suggests that since research has shown that teaching contrastive rhetoric directly appears to have little practical value in improving students' writing, its best use might be to show students that they do not suffer from "individual inadequacies" but, rather, that their L1 practices cannot uncritically be applied to academic writing in English.

Students need to acquire a repertoire of techniques and styles. Mataleen (2001:para. 6) says that the aim of all writing education is to show students how to "mediate among competing rhetorics", and she advocates replacing the term *contrastive rhetoric* with *comparative rhetoric* on the grounds that it would bring into focus similarities as well as differences (para. 9). If students are to develop insights about contrasting rhetorical patterns and conventions, then Arabic and English texts need to be studied together. But the present administrative structures of universities, which separate Arabic and English not only into different courses but also into different departments (except in the study of translation), make this a difficult task to accomplish.

On the other hand, because of the "fluidity of culture" and variety of experience (Spack 1997:772), attempts to attribute students' writing practices to particular causes, such as L1 "interference", may be unproductive. Arabic-speaking students' failure to use subordination or concrete examples, for instance, might result as much from exposure to informal spoken English (as on television) as from the influence of patterns of written Arabic. Another reason to question the significance of contrastive rhetoric for writing pedagogy is Arabic teachers' comments (personal communication) that students do not read widely in Arabic, so it is unlikely that they have internalized these featires of written Arabic.

As English spreads globally and as the number of non-native users overtakes that of native speakers (Graddol 2006:87), rhetorical conventions in academic discourse communities may be changing. This possibility has led Y. Kachru (1997:344) to recommend the desirability of "rais[ing] the consciousness" of the "gatekeepers"—editors, publishers, and other professionals—so that new techniques of academic writing become recognized. Rather than consider students' L1 habits as deviation from or interference with acceptable practice, Ostler (2002) and Canagarajah (2002a) have used lists such as the one above to cast doubt on the primacy of principles of western academic rhetoric itself. The influence of Arabic rhetoric on English may come to parallel the impact of communications technology on discourse communities. Whereas the internet and mobile telephones were once, like Arabic rhetorical patterns, considered to "interfere" with students' writing abilities (Evensen 1996), both may eventually alter the ways academic discourse is conducted in particular communities.

5.3. Skills and content

Discussions of academic writing have tended to accept the supposition that "skills" (how to write) and "content" (what to write about) are separate and distinct. A skills-based pedagogy has developed as an aspect of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which in turn is part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It is assumed that a core of general but identifiable language skills required for academic discourse exists across disciplines. But courses designed on this principle have been found to be inadequate to the needs of the "content" disciplines they are supposed to serve. Criticisms have been made, for example, by Shih (1986:633) who claims that the "pattern [or structure] centered" approach is a reversal of the normal writing process, in which ideas (content) are prior to their method of expression (skills). Leki (2006) refers to research showing that without experience of the content of particular fields, students learn only mechanical skills rather than techniques of organization, tone, argumentation, and use of sources. And Bhatia (2002:26) has pointed out that most EAP syllabuses are based on personal experience and impressions of teachers, rather than on systematic empirical investigations of the nature of academic writing which could establish whether such a common core does, in fact, exist.

Similar objections have been made to attempts to cater for students' writing problems in their "content" courses through programs such as Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) and university Language Centers (Leki 2006). Unless care is taken to find ways of "weaving" academic disciplines together and discerning a common thread, these efforts can fail (Anson 2007). From the perspective of EFL and ESL learners, Muchiri, Nshindi, Mulumba, Myers, and Ndoloi (1995) critique EAP as practiced worldwide on the grounds that it usually caters only for the immediate needs of EL1 students (usually through giving them assistance in completing dissertations).

Differences in basic factors affecting the development of EL1 and EFL pedagogies become more apparent when considering the situation at universities in Qatar and Oman. Since many "content" courses are conducted in Arabic, if academic writing skills are not taught in the English department, then students may not acquire them at all. However, some students have claimed that the only academic writing they do (even in courses where English is the medium of instruction) is in the English courses that are directly concerned with these skills. It might appear, then, that academic writing should not be the concern of English departments at all: either it should be dealt with in Arabic in "content" courses, or else it is not necessary for academic success at Arab universities.

To conceive of academic writing in terms of a content-skills dichotomy leads to such an impasse. If, as many commentators urge, content is prior, then skills are best taught through particular disciplines. On the other hand, if the emphasis is on skills, then we risk the danger of removing writing from the real word of "content". One way out of this dilemma may lie in taking into account the insights of allied areas in most English departments at Arab universities, literary criticism and functional linguistics, both of which posit a union between

skills and content. It is accepted in these fields that the division between *what* is said and *how* it is said is misleading and artificial. Ideas without form of expression cannot exist, and form without content leads to unproductive abstraction.

Bhatia (2002) and Canagarajah (2002b:213) recommend that teaching of writing in the twenty-first century should concentrate less on the individual needs of separate disciplines than on developing abilities to meet requirements in a number of areas. It is becoming increasingly necessary that students should be able to "shuttle" between several discourse communities as a basis of "excellence in academic writing" (Canagarajah 2002a:304-305). To do this, they need to deal critically with both skills and content, which an effective pedagogy should foster. As Canagarajah (2002b:131) also points out, "When discourses are treated as [merely] skills and 'information' [i.e., content] …, students won't have a space for asking larger questions of power and difference".

To fulfill such requirements, Crocker (1984:141) has suggested designing curricula based on *context*. This involves considering a number of "variables"—such as purpose, audience, and how language is appropriately used—rather than emphasizing either subject matter or formal organization. Similarly, Bhatia (2002:31) proposes that academic genres should be placed between "textual" space and "social" space. These approaches stress the contexts of writing—and particularly the speech and discourse communities—as the spaces where skills and content meet and, therefore, where the pedagogical focus should be. The pretense that academic writing can exist apart from these contexts is perpetuated by placing skills and content in separate parts of the curriculum.

6. Conclusion: towards a pedagogy of possibility

Many of the problems in teaching academic writing can be put in terms of the old paradox about education in general. In preparing students for the real world, we subject them to an unreal classroom environment. Neglect of the contexts of speech and discourse communities in Arab universities may be less the fault of students (or teachers) than the consequences of administrative structures and practices which separate reading from writing, Arabic from English, and skills from content. In addition, it may be asked why academic writing should be taught and studied at all when the real reader, the English teacher, is likely to be neither a member of a particular disciplinary discourse community nor (if an expatriate) a member of the speech community, and when students are taught to write in a manner that may prevent them from addressing their own speech community, in which English functions as but one component—sometimes as a "low" code in addition to the "high" code of academic scholarship.

These are aspects of a larger question: What is the role of an English department at an Arab university? Most of our courses in language, linguistics, literature, and translation are centered on theories and principles developed elsewhere and thus run the risk of ignoring empirical experience provided by the local environment. Indeed, many Arab universities have English Language

Centers or Foundation English Programs that are supposed to cater for students' practical language needs. Although there is inevitably some overlap in this work, most academics would agree that there is also a clear distinction between these two kinds of teaching and that both are necessary.

Perhaps we can begin to answer these macro- questions by considering what goes on at a micro- level in academic writing courses. Students engage in developing and limiting a thesis; in proving it through an organized argument that acknowledges and refutes opposing ideas; in presenting a problem and offering a solution; in finding and comprehending source materials and critically evaluating their suitability; in understanding how facts and data have been used by other writers; in integrating these sources into their own discussion; in reaching logical conclusions and presenting recommendations. And they undertake all these activities while taking into account the previous knowledge, experience, and attitudes of other writers and readers, as well as their own.

Surely, these abilities are important in all contexts. They involve knowing what options are available, making appropriate choices, and negotiating communication. They take priority over the mechanics of referencing, literal comprehension, paraphrasing, and grammar, which, although necessary, are means rather than ends in academic writing, as in life. Providing a practical environment for these activities to flourish is the task of what Pierce (1989:408) calls "the pedagogy of possibility". As Dowst's (1989) epistemic approach suggests, teaching ultimately affects how students think of themselves and their world. If they are able to pursue successfully the tasks required for academic writing, understand the need for them and the purposes they serve in human interaction, then they will come to possess the self-confidence to use them appropriately in any context. They are, after all, social as much as language abilities and are the cement that holds all communities together.

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