

Developing Academic Language Competence of Chinese English Learners: From the Perspective of Activity Theory

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This paper describes a course designed to develop Chinese English-major undergraduates' academic language competence. Participants were from one intact class of 28 senior students of English-major. Students' research article (RA) writings of one semester were collected as the main data. Findings of the study show that academic linguistic features and structure can be learned and transferred through the mediating tools: (a) the exemplars of sample RAs; (b) teacher's demonstration, feedback, and mini-training sessions; and (c) genre and norms of RAs. This study is believed to shed new light on English RA writing teaching practices to Chinese EFL learners.

Keywords: academic language competence, Activity Theory

Introduction

English research article (RA) writing competence is essential to Chinese EFL learners' successful handling of academic writing tasks encountered in a higher education setting and is also a prerequisite for their entry into the academic discourse community if they decide to pursue scholarship beyond an undergraduate education (Flowerdew, 2000). The development of RA writing competence, however, can be a very difficult undertaking, even for highly successful non-native speaker scholars (Buckingham, 2008). The difficulty of acquiring RA writing competence in L2 is even greater because an L2 writer has to grapple with a wider range of issues, such as lack of sophistication in their use of language. Therefore, EFL students need systematic guidance and well-designed instruction to acquire academic language writing competence.

This study explores the development of academic language of Chinese English-major undergraduates in classroom instruction environment. RA writing is difficult even for senior students with high language proficiency, because in their previous two or three years' English writing classes, students had been taught to handle simple functional and expressive writing tasks. Those writing tasks aimed to develop students' basic writing skills, which only required personal experiences, thoughts, and common sense, without reading related literatures, rigorous research methods, and writing norms. RA writing requires students not only to tap their own opinions, but also to integrate those opinions with external sources of information and argument.

This study explores Chinese English-major undergraduates' academic language competence development in the classroom context, trying to answer these research questions:

1. Can students learn academic linguistic features of English RA writing from classroom instruction?
2. Can students' academic language competence be transferred from one RA writing task to another?

3. If academic language competence can be learned from classroom instruction and be transferred, what attributes to the learning and transferring?

Academic Language

Based on Snow and Uccelli (2009)'s inventory of features of academic language, features of academic language are listed as in Table 1.

Table 1

Linguistic Features of Academic Language¹ (Adopted From Snow & Uccelli, 2009)

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Interpersonal stance | Detached/distanced stance Authoritative stance |
| Information load | Conciseness Density (<i>high proportion of content words per total words</i>) |
| Organization of information | Constituency/subordination (<i>embedding, one element is a structural part of another</i>) Explicit awareness of organized discourse (<i>central role of textual meta-discourse markers</i>) Autonomous text (<i>endophoric reference</i>) Stepwise logical argumentation/unfolding, tightly constructed |
| Lexical choices | High lexical diversity Formal/prestigious expressions Precision (<i>lexical choices and connectives</i>) Abstract/technical concepts |
| Representational congruence | Complex/congruent grammar (<i>complex sentences</i>) Compact/incongruent grammar (<i>clause embedding and nominalization</i>) Abstract concepts as agents |

Methods

The course was one-semester-long, with total teaching hours: 4 hrs * 19 wks = 76 hours. Participants were from one intact class of 28 senior students of English-major at a university in Shanghai. They were advanced English learners with little experience or almost no systematic instruction in English RA writing before they attended this course. The course curriculum emphasized research-based writing. The goals for this writing centered on engaging students with key elements of academic practice including understanding relevant background knowledge, asking researchable questions, designing questionnaires and interviews, eliciting data and making observations relevant to the question posed, interpreting data to support a theory or model, presenting an argument, and evaluating relevant previous research work.

Students were required to conduct research related to the four subjects from the textbooks they learned: Family Matters, Fashion and Popular Culture, Growing up and Learning, and Work, Play, and Leisure. Writing tasks of the four projects include working plans, questionnaires, outlines, and research reports. On completing Projects 3 and 4, students wrote guided reflections in which they were instructed to report what they learned from the project, the roles they played, and the remaining problems.

Pedagogical Principles

This course adopts a process-centered, theme-oriented, and inquiry-based pedagogy.

The course is process-centered in several senses. First, the teacher adopted a multiple-drafting approach which means that the students revise their writings several times based on the given feedback to each draft.

¹ For the detailed explanations of the terms in Table 1, please refer to Snow and Uccelli (2009, pp. 112-133).

Multiple-drafting is a means to make the RA writing task more accessible by the learners: multiple moves through successive “zones of proximal development (ZPD)” (Vygotsky, 1978). Second, students developed RA writing competence gradually, starting from writing working plans, questionnaires, outlines of the report, to the final reports. The process was dialogic by nature in that there was abundant interaction and negotiation in the accomplishment of these writing tasks between teacher and students, and among students themselves. That was a scaffolding strategy to guide students to move from simple, manageable tasks to the final complex and demanding tasks.

The theme-oriented pedagogy is reflected in the writing tasks around readings dealing with particular themes. For example, in the research project of fashion, students read research articles and did a research task: How do college students select and purchase clothes?

This course is inquiry-based, because the research project plays a central role in writing activities. Activities, such as group discussion, designing questionnaires, selecting respondents, writing working plans, interviewing, eliciting and analyzing data, completing the research reports, and writing reflections are centered on the research project. Those activities can support the course goals, such as raising an awareness of audience, drawing attention to textual and language features, and practicing useful composing strategies.

The mini-training sessions are designed and immediately conducted in response to the problems in research skills and language found in students’ work. For example, in teaching research objectives, teacher asked students the following questions:

1. How do you express a research objective appropriately?
2. Who will be your reader?
3. How do you incorporate information about your research method into your objective statements?

These questions direct students’ thinking and research ability. Once, the functions of each part of the project report have been identified, recurring patterns of discourse provided by the teacher can help students express the functions in the formal academic genre.

Rationales

In human communication, grammatical phenomena are realized through social contexts (Halliday, 2007). Language forms need to be related to the social context and behavioral settings to express the meaning. Halliday’s theory provides a linguistic basis for the design of instruction, i.e., a three-in-one unity, an integration of: (a) social cultural meaning embedded in discourse; (b) communicative functions through which research writing is realized step by step; and (c) syntactic structures/vocabulary through which functions are realized at the social-cultural level.

Vygotskian theory of mediation and its later development of Activity Theory developed by Engeström provide a basis for the integration of learning research with learning of writing. According to Activity Theory (Engeström, 1999), the development of higher intellectual skills is based upon the three mediating tools, namely, the mediating artifacts, the rules, and the division of labor. It is assumed that by leading students through inquiry processes the students will learn language through learning research skills.

Figure 1 demonstrates that learners achieve their object by the mediating tools of scientific thinking and reasoning and the sample RAs. EFL learners establish the relationship with academic community with the mediating tools of genre and norms of RAs, and the object of learning RA writing needs the mediating tool of

division of labor to join in the community. With the three mediating tools, students set the object of learning RA writing and bring it to the outcomes of writing research reports.

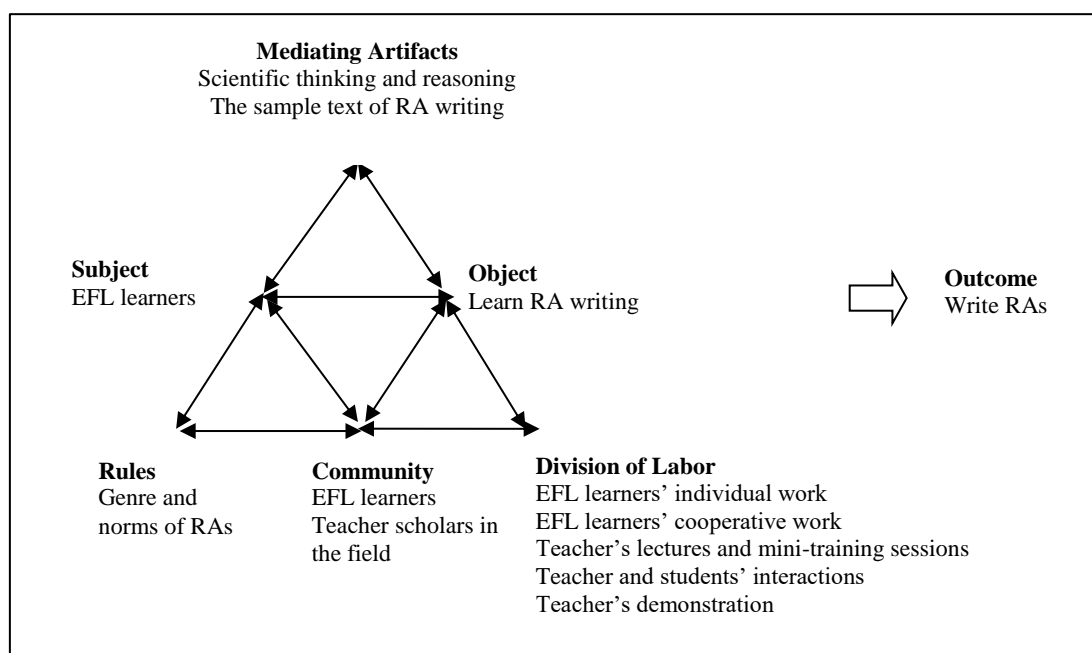


Figure 1. The adjusted model for RA writing teaching.

Inspired by these theories, the teacher follows the following principles on RA writing teaching. The teacher should guide students to study the samples of RA writing and teach knowledge and skills about academic research and let students put them into practice. The teacher should help students establish authorship, which means that as a researcher, students need adjust their voice and tone when writing research reports, and a sense of scholarship for the truthfulness of the information in their writing. The teacher should give immediate and multiple-time feedback to students, which is meaning-based primarily, on aspects of language, such as style, grammar, structures, and wording, followed finally by the mechanics' aspect.

Results

Participants wrote working plans and questionnaires individually in Project 1, while in groups ($N = 6$) in Project 2. In Projects 3 and 4, students were divided into seven groups to write the reports. Table 2 shows the development of academic language in participants' RA writings across the four projects.

Table 2 illustrated that the first drafts of the working plans and questionnaires for Project 1 written by participants individually were not devoid of features of academic-language. In terms of information load and lexical choices, 28 (100%) participants used nominalizations and formal expressions.

However, participants' first drafts also displayed a considerable amount of colloquial features which were inappropriate for RA. Fifteen (54%) participants used expressive/involved stance in contrast to only 13 (46%) participants using distanced stance. In organization of information, 20 (71%) participants used more colloquial features, such as loosely connected structures. In representational congruence, 20 (71%) participants used colloquial features like simple short sentences in a discourse.

Table 2

Linguistic Features of Participants' RA Writings Across Four Projects

| Linguistic features (more colloquial or more academic) | | Projects | | | | |
|---|--|------------------------|-----------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | | 1 (N = 28 students) | | 2 (N = 6 groups) | 3 (N = 7 groups) | 4 (N = 7 groups) |
| | | 1st draft | 2nd draft | | | |
| Interpersonal stance | Expressive/involved stance | 15 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Distanced/authoritative stance | 13 | 19 | 6 | 7 | 7 |
| Information load | Redundancy | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Conciseness | 28 | 28 | 6 | 7 | 7 |
| Organization of information | Loosely connected structure | 20 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Stepwise logical argumentation/tightly constructed | 8 | 8 | 6 | 7 | 7 |
| Lexical choices | Low lexical diversity/informal expressions | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | High lexical diversity/Formal expressions | 28 | 28 | 6 | 7 | 7 |
| Representational congruence | Simple grammar | 20 | 19 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Complex grammar | 8 | 9 | 6 | 7 | 7 |

Starting from the second drafts of Project 1, participants began to show improvement in expressive/involved interpersonal stance by a decrease of 21%. The involved interpersonal features disappeared completely in Projects 2, 3, and 4 when participants worked on a group basis.

Similar trends of improvement can also be found with the features of organization of information. Loosely connected/dialogic structures were found in 20 participants' first drafts of Project 1, and this quickly dropped to zero in Project 2 as a result of immediate feedback, multiple drafting, and acquisition of the knowledge of academic conventions.

With regard to representational congruence, participants made significant improvements in complex grammar which increased from 29% to 32% in their first drafts and second drafts of Project 1, and increased to 100% in the subsequent three projects when students worked on the group basis.

Discussion

Results prove that academic language competence can be learned from classroom instruction. In the beginning, students showed low RA writing competence. Their first drafts displayed a considerable amount of colloquial features which were inappropriate for RAs. With the projects moving on, they made progress. Their academic language competence was transferred from Project 1 to Project 4 totally. What attributes to the learning and transferability?

As depicted in Figure 1, in Activity Theory there are three mutual relationships between the subject, the object, and the community. In RA writing process, these three mediating tools are: (a) sample RA writings; (b) genre and norms of RAs; and (c) teacher's demonstration, feedback, and mini-training sessions.

The Mediating Role of Sample RA Writings

The sample research offered by the teacher, articles from the course pack, and the students' inadequate RA writings serve the purpose of demonstrating the thinking processes behind a good project report and a poor one. Thus, students understand that poor RA writing results from inappropriate research skills and failure to see the writing task in a researcher's perspective, while good RA writing is based on well-designed research. Articles in the textbooks provide a source of academic knowledge and key concepts. Studying the sample research, students

learn the discourse structure of RA, the function of each part of research paper, the genre of RA, and the norms and conventions of RA. Exposure to and production of written language is the main factor in enriching linguistic literacy, especially sophisticated features in writing (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002). The RAs in textbook and teacher's sample research paper serve as the exemplars of sophisticated linguistic features. The articles in the textbooks provide the content and language input for the writing activities. Moreover, the reading materials provide the students with opportunities to practice writing from background sources, which is an important feature of RA writing. The readings demonstrate how the various elements of a genre are realized in authentic text, providing models for the students to emulate (Silva & Brice, 2004).

The Mediating Role of Genre and Norms of RAs

RA writing is different from other types of writing, because it not only needs language proficiency but also the knowledge of genre and norms of RAs. In RA writing, participants have difficulty in expressing in appropriate RA genre. In writing RAs, students are not treated as EFL learners whose target reader is the teacher only, but researchers in academic community. Teacher teaches the norms and genre of RAs, to raise students' awareness of authorship, knowledge of discourse structure of RA, and the research skills.

The Mediating Role of Teacher's Demonstration, Feedback, and Mini-training Sessions

Teacher's demonstration, feedback, and mini-training sessions help to improve students' RA writing as apprentice researchers. In class, the teacher analyzed the problems with students' poor RA writings and demonstrated the research paper written by the teacher. Thus, students learned the discourse structure of RA, academic language, and how to apply scientific thinking and reasoning in the moves of RA. By analyzing the problems in students' RA writings, students came to realize the causes for poor RA writing.

Teacher's instant feedback at each stage of students' project work helps students acquire the RA writing competence effectively. Writing is a cyclic process. Teacher's immediate feedback provides suggestions for effective revision of students' work. Developing students' RA writing skills requires timely and appropriate feedback. Teachers need to provide students with formative feedback with the aim of improving students learning processes (Stern & Solomon, 2006). In the process of giving students feedback on their work, appropriate learner behavior can be reinforced, progress reported to students, and learning opportunities extended (K. E. Konold, Miller, & K. B. Konold, 2004). Feedback needs to be considered in relation to what we now know about how student learning best takes place. Theories of social constructivism and the social nature of learning suggest that we learn better with the support of a significant other (Carson & Nelson, 1994; Jarvis & Robinson, 1997). In this study, teacher's feedback is provided first of all at the discourse level, focusing on the content, followed by feedback in communicative functions of the discourse, judging whether the moves in the discourse realized the expected communicative purposes. This instant feedback helps students develop their research skills as well as language skills.

Mini-training sessions intend to deal with students' language problems of one certain discourse structure by instant training. Students learn how to make statements by using sentence patterns provided by the teacher, in order to realize the communicative purposes of that discourse structure.

Conclusion

Findings of the study show that academic language competence can be learned and transferred in the conditions of the mediating tools: (a) the exemplars of sample RAs; (b) teacher's demonstration, feedback, and

mini-training sessions; and (c) genre and norms of RAs. Findings of this course have significant implications to English RA writing teaching.

This course proves that learners' language skills' development is dependent on their development of research skills. Their initial language proficiency is the prerequisite for studying the research theme. The knowledge gained from the theme study, in turn, facilitates learners' research competence which enriches their thoughts. The enrichment of thinking leads to their need in language, which promotes the language input and output. Thus, the interactions between teacher and students increase, giving more chances for revisions in learners' language and thoughts. All those factors help develop learners' knowledge of the theme, research skills, and writing abilities. Learners' language knowledge and research skills develop interactively and synchronously. That is why teacher designs the teaching procedures step by step, giving the learning opportunities of the mixed development of these two aspects gradually.

This study offers some pedagogical suggestions to English RA writing teaching in Chinese classroom contexts. Both positive and negative sample RAs should be demonstrated to students. Students should be treated as researchers rather than student writers, to be encouraged to establish authorial identities in academic community. Moreover, teachers' immediate feedback at the discourse level and multiple-drafting is a significant means to solve students' language problems as well as their research difficulties.

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