

Unit A5

Discourses, communities and cultures

The notion of English for *specific* Academic Purposes, and its emphasis on disciplinary-based literacies, encourages us to think about the different discourses and practices that are valued in different content fields. While disciplines are often distinguished by their specialized subject areas, the diverse topics, methodologies and ways of seeing the world which characterize them also mean that they have different discourses, different expectations of argument and different forms of verification. What counts as a worthwhile study, an effective argument and adequate evidence all depends on the disciplinary community the student is acting in. This means that writers and presenters succeed in being persuasive to the extent they can frame arguments in ways that their readers and listeners will find most convincing.

Because knowledge produced by the academy is cast largely in written language, variation in spoken genres such as lectures, seminars, peer discussions and conference presentations across disciplines has tended to be neglected until recently (Hyland, 2006). Large spoken academic corpora such as the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) and the British Academic Spoken Corpus (BASE) are now becoming available, however (see Unit A7). This means that our understandings of disciplinary variation in spoken discourses are likely to be improved in the coming years and specific teaching materials will become increasingly available. Disciplinary variation raises a number of key issues concerning what it means to interact within a discipline, the connections between knowledge and discourse, and the influence of communities and cultures on communication. This unit introduces these issues.

DISCOURSE AND KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

Learning a discipline implies, among other goals, learning to use language in disciplinarily approved ways. It involves learning a specialized discourse for reading and writing, for presenting orally, for reasoning and problem solving, and for carrying out practical research activities. The key concepts of a discipline, its methods of persuasion, its ways of negotiating interpretations and its practices of constructing knowledge are all defined through and by language. Learning a discipline thus means learning to communicate as a member of a community. The language of science, engineering, literature or marketing is learnt in large measure

by employing it for particular purposes in particular settings, and the EAP teacher's job, in part anyway, is to assist this process. Student communication is at the centre of this activity, as learning is largely mediated through written language, and control of disciplinary writing has important consequences. This is the main way that students consolidate their learning in a subject area, the means by which tutors judge the extent students have understood material, and the main instrument for assessing success or failure.

This focus on academic writing, or what Lillis (2001) calls 'essayist literacy', reflects both the gatekeeping role it plays in academic settings and the importance it has in representing academic knowledge. Essayist literacy is not a specific genre but 'institutionalized shorthand for a particular way of constructing knowledge which has come to be privileged within the academy' (Lillis, 2001: 20). This form of discourse possesses considerable 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1991) as it is seen to be a guarantee of objectivity and truth: a way of representing knowledge based on impartial observation, experimental proof or faultless logic, free of the bias and interests of other forms of discourse, such as politics and commerce. But disciplinary discourses are not simply the ways that academics report their findings: just dressing the thoughts that they send into the world. They create, or *construct*, knowledge itself by securing community agreement for claims (Bruffee, 1986; Geertz, 1983).

The view that knowledge is created through the discourses of social communities has its roots in the theory of *social constructivism*. This suggests that the ways we understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are not 'truths' proven and fixed for all time but are specific to particular cultures and periods. In other words, our knowledge does not result from objective descriptions of what the world is *really* like, but emerges in part through our perceptions of that world during our interactions. No matter how careful our experiments or rigorous our armchair reasoning, they always involve interpretation, and interpretation always depends, at least in part, on the assumptions researchers bring to the problem they are studying. Understanding is always filtered through beliefs. As the physicist Stephen Hawking (1993: 44) notes, a theory may describe a range of observations, but 'beyond that it makes no sense to ask if it corresponds to reality, because we do not know what reality is independent of a theory'. More simply, in Rorty's (1979: 170) words, knowledge is 'the social justification of belief', and in academic contexts this justification is accomplished through academic discourses.

In sum, academics cannot step outside the beliefs of their social groups to tell us 'what the world is really like' but have to draw on conventional ways of producing agreement. Persuasive potency is not grounded in rationality, exacting methodologies, dispassionate observation or informed reflection as there will always be more than one plausible interpretation of any piece of data. These competing interpretations shift attention from what happens in the lab or the library to what happens on the page. Social constructivism thus sees the agreement of community members at the heart of knowledge construction, and the language used to reach that agreement as central to the success of both students and academics. An

important implication of this position for teachers is that, because it helps students to gain access to the discourses which create agreement, EAP has a central role in higher education.



Task A5.1

- ‘Social constructivism thus sees the agreement of community members at the heart of knowledge construction, and the language used to reach that agreement as central to the success of both students and academics.’ What consequences might this have for students, academics and EAP teachers? How would it influence your work as an EAP teacher?

DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

Social constructivism tells us that the intellectual climate in which academics live and work determines the problems they investigate, the methods they employ, the results they see and the ways they write them up. This means that successful academic writing and speaking means projecting a shared context, and as we have become more sensitive to the ways language is used by individuals acting in social groups, the concept of *community* has become a key idea in EAP.

This community-based orientation to literacy focuses on the importance of writing and speaking, and learning to write and speak, as an *insider* of the community one wishes to engage with. Goffman’s (1959) notion of ‘membership’ is crucial here as it draws attention to the importance of ‘talking the talk’ and the implication that academic groups might be constituted by their characteristic genres of interaction, of how they get things done, rather than existing through physical membership. An individual’s engagement in disciplinary discourses can comprise membership of that discipline, an idea Swales (1998) elaborates as a ‘textography of communities’.

The concept of community draws attention to the idea that we use language to communicate not only with the world at large, but with other members of our social groups, each one with its own norms, categorizations, sets of conventions and modes of inquiry (Bartholomae, 1986). Swales (1990) has defined these communities as having collective goals or purposes, while other writers have suggested a weaker connection, arguing that common interests, rather than shared goals, are essential (Johns, 1997). Barton (1994: 57), for instance, suggests they can be loose-knit groups engaged in either the reception or production of texts, or both:

A discourse community is a group of people who have texts and practices in common, whether it is a group of academics, or the readers of teenage magazines. In fact, discourse community can refer to the people the text is aimed at; it can be the people who read a text; or it can refer to the people who participate in a set of discourse practices both by reading and writing.

Unfortunately, however, there is no clear agreement on where to actually locate discourse communities or where to draw their boundaries once we have. Is, for example, a student cohort, a university department, a specialism or a discipline the best example of a community? Are they, in other words, *local* and made up of people who regularly work together or *global* and composed of those who have a commitment to particular actions and discourses. The idea of a *disciplinary community*, for instance, suggests a relatively dispersed group of like-minded individuals, while Swales (1998) has more recently opted for a narrower version in his idea of *place discourse communities*. This draws attention to groups who regularly work together and have a sense of their common roles, purposes, discourses and history. This local–global distinction is constantly being eaten away by the advance of electronic communications which bring members in other continents closer than those in the next corridor, but the idea of a constraining system defined by a body of texts and practices is at the heart of the concept.

Discourse community therefore helps join writers, texts and readers together and, irrespective of how we define the idea, it is difficult to see how we might do without it. Essentially, it draws together a number of key aspects of context that are crucial to the ways spoken and written discourse is produced and understood. Cutting (2002: 3) points out that these are the:

- *Situational context*: what people ‘know about what they can see around them’.
- *Background knowledge context*: what people know about the world, what they know about aspects of life and what they know about each other.
- *Co-textual context*: what people ‘know about what they have been saying’.

Community thus provides a principled way of understanding how meaning is produced *in interaction* and so is useful in identifying how we communicate in a way that others can see as ‘doing biology’ or ‘doing sociology’. These community conventions both restrict how something can be said and authorize the writer as someone competent to say it.

But the concept also has its critics. Some see it as a static and deterministic notion which overemphasizes conformity to shared values and practices and ignores diversity and conflict (e.g. Prior, 1998). In fact, discourse communities are not monolithic but hybrid, often inhabited by varied values and discourses and by individuals with diverse experiences, interests and influence. The experiences of many multilingual students, for example, point to the stress which can be created in shuttling between home and academic communities (Canagarajah, 1999). But this diversity is inherent in all groups and need not create antagonisms and tensions. We are typically members of several communities simultaneously – of the home, the workplace and of the academy – and so our commitment to them and participation in them can vary tremendously.

The idea of community therefore remains useful, but vague. Criticisms have sharpened the construct, however, and now we are encouraged to think of a community as more of an individual’s engagement in its practices than of his or her orientations

to rules and goals. Communities are not simply bundles of discourse conventions but 'ways of being' in the world, influencing the ways we act, the views we espouse, the values we hold and the identities we adopt. Nor, as Swales (1998) reminds us, does a community have to be supportive, congenial or democratic, although the most dysfunctional ones are likely to collapse. But despite difficulties, the construct helps us to see some ways that disciplines influence target texts and practices and draws attention to the fact that the discourses we teach our students are embedded in social and cultural contexts.



Task A5.2

- Can you identify the discourse communities you are a member of? How central is your participation in each one? Try to draw a sociometric diagram with you in the middle. This may help you to see how these communities of which you are a member overlap.

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

Culture, seen ethnolinguistically and institutionally (e.g. Sarangi and Roberts, 1999), influences not only how students are expected to write and speak in the academy, but also the ways of writing and speaking they bring with them from their home environments. Through repeated experiences we develop preferred genres and patterns of communicating which come to seem natural and automatic. We gradually gain control of the genres and communicative practices we take part in by actually engaging in those genres and practices, remembering what genres are best suited to achieve which purposes and how they are set out to best say what we want to say. This kind of knowledge is sometimes referred to by literacy theorists as a *schema*, or system for storing and retrieving past knowledge. It includes knowledge about particular text features, about how a genre is used, about the contexts it occurs in, and about the roles and values associated with it. This allows us to participate in particular real-world communicative events.

The fact that cultural experiences help shape schemata means that the knowledge and expectations of our L2 students may be very different from our own and therefore influence their performance in class. While culture is a controversial notion, with no single agreed definition, one version sees it as an historically transmitted and systematic network of meanings which allow us to understand, develop and communicate our knowledge and beliefs about the world (Lantolf, 1999; Street, 1995). Language and learning are therefore closely bound up with culture. This is partly because our cultural values are carried through language, but also because cultures make available certain taken-for-granted ways of organizing our understandings, including those we use to learn and communicate. In other words, they involve interpretation as well as performance. Such differences potentially include the following:

- Different linguistic proficiencies and intuitions about language.
- Different learning experiences and classroom expectations.
- Different sense of audience and self as a text producer.
- Different preferences for ways of organizing texts.
- Different writing, reading and speaking processes.
- Different understandings of text uses and the social value of different text types.

By recognizing these potential differences teachers can ensure their classroom expectations, teaching practices and assessment procedures are fair and effective.

One important, and often neglected, element in EAP classrooms is the potential for culturally divergent attitudes to knowledge to influence students' language production and how we understand students' progress. Ballard and Clanchy (1991) point out that these attitudes spread along a continuum from respecting knowledge to valuing its extension. Educational processes in Western contexts reinforce an analytical, questioning and evaluative stance to knowledge, encouraging students to criticize and recombine existing sources to dispute traditional wisdom and form their own points of view. Many Asian cultures, however, favour conserving and reproducing existing knowledge, establishing reverence for what is known through strategies such as memorization and imitation. While such strategies demonstrate respect for knowledge, they may look to Western teachers like reproducing others' ideas. So by ignoring cultural considerations, teachers may see this as plagiarism or repetition, and be misled into recasting such respect for knowledge as copying (e.g. Pennycook, 1996) or as naive and immature writing.

Culture can also intrude into learning through students' expectations about instruction and the meanings they give to classroom tasks. Students' previous learning experiences may not have adequately prepared them for the kinds of topics, teaching styles, extended writing assignments, oral presentations, analyses of real texts, and consciousness-raising tasks which often characterize EAP classes. Not all students find it easy to take a critical or combative stance towards a topic or commit themselves to a position, for example, while others may dislike asking questions or participating in groups.

One potential problem area is that of peer review. Asking students to respond to their classmates' writing is generally seen as beneficial in L2 instruction, but while it may help some learners to envisage their audience more effectively, peer evaluation has been criticized as inappropriate for learners from collectivist cultures. Carson and Nelson (1996: 1), for instance, found that Chinese students often avoided criticism of peers' work and so provided no useful feedback to them:

Chinese students' primary goal for the groups was social – to maintain group harmony – and that this goal affected the nature and types of interaction they allowed themselves in group discussions . . . This self-monitoring led them to avoid criticism of peers' work and to avoid disagreeing with the comments of peers about their own writing.



Task A5.3

- In what ways are cultural factors likely to influence the ways students write and learn to write or to speak in an academic variety of English? Are these factors only likely to impact the writing of L2 students? How might you accommodate these differences in your teaching and assessments?

CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC

Perhaps the most examined influence of culture on language is the different expectations people have about academic communication. The field of *contrastive rhetoric* actively uses the notion of culture to explain differences in written texts and writing practices. Although findings are inconclusive, research suggests that the schemata of L2 and L1 writers differ in their preferred ways of organizing ideas, and that these cultural preconceptions can influence communication (e.g. Connor, 2002; Hinkel, 2002).

In a review of seventy-two studies comparing research into first- and second-language writing, for example, Silva (1993: 669) noted that 'L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically and linguistically different in important ways from L1 writing'. These conclusions have been supported by a range of studies comparing features of academic genres across cultures, producing the generalization that, compared with other languages, Anglo-American academic English tends to:

- Be more explicit about its structure and purposes.
- Employ more, and more recent, citations.
- Use fewer rhetorical questions.
- Be generally less tolerant of digressions.
- Be more tentative and cautious in making claims.
- Have stricter conventions for sub-sections and their titles.
- Use more sentence connectors (such as *therefore* and *however*).

It is unwise, however, to attribute all aspects of L2 performance to L1 writing practices. There is a tendency in this research to identify cultures with national entities, thus emphasizing a predictable sharedness *within* cultures and differences *across* them (e.g. Atkinson, 2004). Students have identities beyond the language and culture they were born into and we should avoid the tendency to stereotype them according to cultural dichotomies. We cannot simply read off cultural preferences from the surface of texts: all rhetorical patterns are available to all writers and do not allow us to predict how students from different language backgrounds will write. Spack (1997), for instance, argues that focusing on culture to explain writing differences prompts a normative, essentializing stance which leads to lumping students together on the basis of their first language. Students are not merely cultural *types* and it is perhaps a major task of EAP teachers to disabuse subject teachers of such assumptions.

This is a useful caution, but it is equally important that we should not ignore research which might help us understand the ways individuals write in a second language. Teachers can take a number of different insights from contrastive rhetoric. Most important, it helps us to recognize that student difficulties in writing or speaking may be due to the disjunction of the writer's and reader's view of what is needed in a text and that different writing styles can be the result of culturally learnt preferences. This encourages us to see the effects of different practices where we might otherwise only see individual inadequacies.

Task A5.4



- Consider a student or group of students you are familiar with. To what extent do you think their writing or speaking in English may have been influenced by their L1? Can such influences be positive as well as negative?