

CHAPTER 7.

THE ACADEMIC WRITING RESEARCH GROUP AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA

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In this paper, I describe 10 years of research on students' academic writing conducted at the University of Vienna. Furthermore, I describe the (small) success my team had in implementing the results of this research as a university-wide writing support program for doctoral students. Since 1999, I have carried out three successive research projects on students' academic writing. In the first two projects, textual characteristics of seminar papers, students' and instructors' views of students' writing, and student-instructor interaction in selected courses were investigated following the academic literacies approach. In the third project, the results of this previous research provided the basis for developing an academic writing course for students in a blended learning environment. We also developed a detailed concept for establishing a writing center at Vienna University that could not be realized in the intended form, but that at least resulted in establishing a series of university-wide writing courses for doctoral students.

I started my academic career in 1986 as an assistant professor (“Assistent”) at the Applied Linguistics section of the Department of Linguistics at Vienna University. The first course I taught there was an “Introduction to text linguistics.” Although I have never viewed text linguistics and discourse analysis as “applied” subfields of linguistics, students seemed to expect me to have an applied angle towards my teaching (and research) subjects, simply because I was part of the “Applied Linguistics” team at the department. So it was no surprise that every now and then students who had difficulties in writing their seminar papers¹ approached me in order to help them. And time after time, I also heard complaints from students who told me that “you are the specialist on text linguistics here at the department but you never teach us anything which we could use to improve our own writing.” At first, I was a bit baffled about these complaints

because my course had never been intended to teach students anything else than the basic concepts and theories of text and discourse analysis, but also because for me writing in academia had never posed a problem. Whenever I had had to master a new genre during my time as a student at university, I simply looked for texts which seemed (to me) to be good examples of the respective genre and then tried to bring together the demands of my actual writing task with the features of these texts—somehow I produced a text. From the feedback (or in most cases from the lack of feedback) and from the grades I received, I learned that I must have succeeded somehow in acquiring the relevant genres. But my students' complaints made me think about the way students learn to write academic texts in more general ways; they made me curious to know more about students' academic writing in the Austrian university system.

Up to the late nineties, the Austrian university system had much in common with the description of the German university system that Foster (2002) provides in regard to students' writing. The course system consisted of two major groups of courses: "lecture" courses in which an academic teacher presented the course content to their student- audience and in which students received their grades either through an oral or through a written exam; and (roughly speaking) "non-lecture" courses in which a lecturer could demand students to engage in several kinds of activities during and after the course which all could be made relevant for receiving a grade. In many of these latter courses, students had to write some kind of text (literature reviews, field or lab reports, shorter or longer seminar papers, etc.), which were in principle due at the end of the semester in which the course took place. However, a general regulation in the Austrian university law stipulated that written papers which served as a course requirement could be handed in up to four semesters after the end of a course; i.e., in principle students had two years for finishing their papers. Of course, some departments found ways to bypass this regulation by creating strict entry conditions for courses in subsequent semesters, which demanded students to provide evidence of positive grades from courses in the previous semester, etc. But in principle (if they could afford it in whatever respect) Austrian students had much time for fulfilling their writing tasks—time which they could use to experiment with new academic genres, revise their texts, seek model texts, or seek advice from peers and lecturers—or decide not to write the demanded paper when they found an equivalent course in which they could fulfill course requirements in an easier way. Thus, for dedicated students the Austrian system offered the opportunity to acquire new genres in a self-guided way, but for the other students it did not offer any support (except style-sheets which are provided by many departments and/or lecturers and which detail formal requirements like line spacing, margin widths, bibliographical styles, etc.²).

My own advice to students who had asked me for help with their papers up to this time had been based on the implicit and explicit knowledge I had of certain academic genres rather than on any systematic investigation of students' writing skills and/ or shortcomings. So in the summer semester 1999, I carried out an exploratory project in cooperation with the department of personnel management at the University of Economics and Business Administration in Vienna, in order to deepen my own understanding of students' writing. The cooperation with this department was partly triggered by methodological considerations, but also by opportunistic ones. From a methodological point of view, I did not want to investigate students' writing at my own department in order to avoid my potentially biased view of students' texts influencing the results of my study. Therefore, investigating students' texts from a different discipline with a social science background (which made them comparable to at least a big fraction of Linguistics students' texts) seemed to provide an unbiased way of investigating students' writing. The opportunistic aspect of this cooperation consisted in the fact that at this time my colleague Ursula Doleschal, who also has a strong interest in students' academic writing, held a position at the Business University and established a connection to the department of personnel management. This first exploratory project, in which 18 students' seminar papers from one seminar (i.e., a course for advanced students who would start working on their MA-theses after finishing this course) were investigated, established some themes which are still present in my theoretical and practical work concerning students' writing:

- The research followed a multi-methods approach: apart from the students' papers, instructor-student interaction in the seminar was investigated through participant observation by two student-research assistants, and interviews were conducted with all students in the seminar and the instructor in order to obtain students' and instructor's subjective views on the respective seminar, and on students' writing at the university in general. This approach made it possible to triangulate the results of the linguistic text analysis with results from participant observation and interview data. This methodology reflects the basic assumptions of the academic literacies approach (Jones, Turner, & Street, 1999; Lea & Street, 1998), which views students' writing as a complex social practice at the intersection of institutional demands, disciplinary constraints, and individual pre-dispositions.
- Textual analysis (and—later on—didactic implementation of the results of text analyses) was inspired by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL; Halliday, 1994), and especially by the register and genre approach (Eggins & Martin, 1997). SFL is a metafunctional approach to language that

assumes that each utterance conveys meaning on the ideational (=content), the interpersonal, and the textual level. The register and genre approach assumes a strong bi-directional relation between contextual variables and textual (generic) features. Genres are viewed as staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activities in which speakers engage as members of a culture (Eggin & Martin, 1997) and which are teachable to novices.³ As no comprehensive SFL model of German yet exists, the categories of analysis were partly taken from other functional approaches to language (e.g., functional pragmatics and rhetorical structure theory; Ehlich, 1985; Mann & Thompson, 1987).

- From the very beginning of my interest in students' writing, I dealt with the topic under an applied perspective. Thus, I have been interested in finding out strengths and weaknesses of students' texts and ways of improving students' writing in the institutional context of Austrian universities. And from the beginning I tried to investigate both aspects under two perspectives: first, by establishing linguistic evaluation criteria from the literature on academic writing. This first perspective provides an inventory of linguistic features of "adequate" or "well written" academic texts that were established in previous investigations of students' academic writing. But as the academic literacies approach cautions us not to generalize results from one context to another, and as most investigations of students' academic writing have been carried out in an anglophone context, the results of these studies cannot simply be transposed to the Austrian context. Thus, to avoid premature generalisations, a second perspective is necessary: in the interviews with instructors (and, if possible, in their written notes), their assessment criteria for students' texts were collected and "translated" into linguistic terms as far as possible. Additionally, each paper's grade was set into a relation to its textual properties and thus, a set of instructors' implicit evaluation criteria was established.

Because of the lack of personal and financial resources, the 18 students' papers, the interview data, and the protocols of the participant observation that were obtained in this first project, were analyzed qualitatively. Results showed that the departments' writing demands for students' seminar papers were communicated rather explicitly, albeit in a very short form and without offering students any support for their writing process. Results also showed that in this special seminar, a number of institutional difficulties and hurdles for students' working and writing processes had occurred, which partly were due to singular problems of this single seminar but partly were also characteristic of the institution as a whole. Both kinds of problems, of course, had a negative impact

on students' motivation. The interview data also showed a mismatch between the motivations the instructors attributed to students for deciding to attend the seminar and students' actual motivations: whereas instructors thought that most students would attend the seminars at their department because of the high quality of teaching and students' support, all but one student simply choose the course because it fit well into their timetable. Accordingly, students did not invest too much time and effort into writing their papers, which instructors in turn interpreted as low achievement of (in their view) highly motivated students (Gruber, Wetschanow, & Herzberger, 1999).

Results of the textual analyses showed that, in their texts, most students tried to comply with the instructor's (and department's) most emphasized writing demand, namely to produce an explicit "problem formulation." Many students, however, did this in a rather superficial and formal manner and therefore all but one student produced texts which realized a descriptive, non-empirical genre which in a later publication was called "taxonomic report" (Gruber, et al., 2006). In this genre, students describe and/or elaborate some basic concepts which together constitute the topic of their papers (e.g., "Implementation and personnel management"). On the macro-structural level, two varieties of this genre occurred: (1) papers that employ a limited number of semantic relations ("is a," "has a") between headings (=main section) and sub-headings (=sub-sections), which results in clear and easily comprehensible overall content structures. In these papers, the content of the sub-sections elaborates the content of the main sections. (2) Papers that mainly employ an additive relation between successive sections, be it main- or sub-sections. These papers meander from one topic to the next without developing a clear overall content structure. As was to be expected, papers of the first group earned better grades than papers of the second group.

The descriptive genre of the majority of the papers resonates also on the micro-textual level: the major text organizing principle on the paragraph- and clause-level was called the "list-style" (Gruber, Wetschanow & Herzberger, 1999: 38ff.). In this kind of text organization, the elements of a list may come from different textual levels, i.e., word, clause, or paragraph, which results in word-, clause- or paragraph-lists respectively. Wordlists were the most frequent variant of this style. They resemble outlines, and in fact they were frequently used to summarize and represent the primary and secondary sources the students read. In many cases the terms in the list were hyponyms of those terms that functioned as "list headings." Word lists resemble also the descriptive tables of contents found on the macro-level of texts. Thus, similar textual devices occurred on the macro- and on the micro-level of the texts. The difference between the two devices is, however, that the table of contents is elaborated in

the text, whereas the word-list is the text. In most cases word lists have negative consequences for the thematic progression of the texts. Especially if several word lists occur in a series, no systematic flow of information (thematic progression) can be developed. The resulting texts resemble an elaborate excerpt or outline, but not a proper text. Clause- and paragraph-lists resemble word lists. They are, however, constituted by clauses and paragraphs respectively, and thus allow for more elaborate thematic structures. The use of paragraph lists especially can result in an ordered and clearly arranged thematic structure, if they are introduced by topic sentences and closed by resuming sentences or paragraphs. All in all, the prevalent use of the list style and the lack of argumentation on the macro-structural level in most papers seem to indicate that most students followed a “knowledge-telling-strategy” rather than a “knowledge-transforming-strategy” (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987). Students’ use of the list style (and all other micro-textual features), however, did not seem to have much impact on the grades the papers received (except in those cases where texts consisted mainly of word lists, which made the impression that the respective seminar paper was a compilation of bullet-point lists).

The results of this exploratory project were used to formulate a couple of more focused research questions on students’ academic writing in the context of Austrian universities, and a bigger project was conducted (funded by the Austrian science foundation; FWF project P14720-G03). In this study (Gruber et al., 2006), students’ writing practices in three social science disciplines (social history, business studies, business psychology) were investigated. The rationale behind this choice was that these three disciplines share a social science background and a common research area, namely economy and business, but they have different theoretical angles towards their research topics. It was therefore expected that the students’ texts would exhibit parallels as well as discipline-specific differences. Following the multi-disciplinary approach already employed in the exploratory project, the study combined textual analyses with interview analyses and participant observation of three courses. The theoretical framework transcended the register and genre approach and combined Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1992) with the academic literacies approach (Jones, et al., 1999). Following these theoretical considerations, a text production model was developed that differentiates between “text types” (abstract units on a rather general level), which are mainly influenced by the general social and institutional purposes they serve, and “genres,” which are conceived as (semiotically enriched) realisations of text types in concrete institutional and social contexts. Text types and genres are related to the field specific habitus of persons insofar as the knowledge of the appropriateness of certain text types and genres for certain kinds of tasks in a field are relevant sym-

bolic capitals. One general goal of the project was to investigate if students have already developed a discipline-specific habitus and hence if they produce texts which realise discipline-specific genres. A further major goal was to investigate if and which linguistic features of a seminar paper correlate with the grade it receives.

Quantitative and qualitative text analyses of all linguistic characteristics (generic and rhetorical structures, meta-communication, intertextuality, argumentation, modality, lexis) that were analysed showed that students in the three seminars produced different genres, which, however, belonged to one abstract text type which was coined “academic qualification text.” This text type is located at the intersection of two social fields, namely the field of academia and the field of the university, respectively (Bourdieu, 1992). The results of the interview analyses showed that students are aware of the double institutional purpose of the text type in differing, yet systematically varying ways. Whereas social history students mainly oriented towards the academic purpose of a seminar paper and thus display the habitus of “apprentice scholars,” management students and most of the business psychology students orient towards the assessment character of the texts they produce and thus display a “student habitus.” The relationship between linguistic features of the texts and the grades the papers received was similar to results from the exploratory study. Most linguistic features of the micro-textual level did not show any correlation with the grades the papers received. Many features of the meso- and macro- textual level, however, did show rather systematic correlations with grades.

AN ACADEMIC WRITING COURSE DEVELOPED OUT OF THIS RESEARCH

In a follow-up project (FWF project L 179-G03), an academic writing course for (advanced) students, which was based on the results of the previous project, was developed in a blended learning framework (Apel & Kraft, 2003). The course design comprised the development of: (a) a web-based entrance module which consists of a self assessment for students’ writing skills, and an investigation of the extent of their demand of assistance; (b) a general (discipline-independent) module containing information on academic writing; (c) two discipline-specific modules offering information on and training in academic writing (developed for Linguistics and Social and Economic History students).

The entrance module consists of a series of questions and tasks students have to complete and is designed to detect the individual students’ level of previous writing experience and knowledge. This module was implemented

on the e-learning platform of Vienna University. The results of the entrance module were used to decide whether individual students were advised to work through one (or several) chapters of the general module before attending the writing course, or if they could attend the writing course without additional pre-course instruction. For the purpose of developing didactic applications of the linguistic results of the previous projects, the linguistic concepts and categories were “translated” into “everyday concepts” of scholarly work with which students were expected to be familiar. The linguistic categories were mapped onto didactic domains as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Linguistic Categories and Didactic Domains

Areas of linguistic analysis	Didactic domains
Macro-structure (SFL, RST)	Structure of a seminar paper, connecting text-segments, argumentation
Meta-communication	Structure of a seminar paper, connecting text-segments, general issues of academic writing
Intertextuality	Perspective
Argumentation	Explication and Argumentation
Modality	Difference between the language of everyday life and scientific language, Perspective, argumentation
Lexis	Difference between the language of everyday life and scientific language

The general module covers seven broad areas relevant for a functional understanding of the specifics of academic language and academic genres in the humanities and social sciences: “What is science?,” “Scholarly work,” “Academic language,” “Differences between everyday language and academic language,” “Structuring a paper,” “Perspective,” “Describing, Explaining, and Argumentation.” The module was designed as a hypertext and is available online at <http://www.univie.ac.at/linguistics/schreibprojekt/Grundlagen> .

The two discipline specific courses elaborate the language-related aspects of the general module and comprise the following broad areas: “Structuring a paper,” “Perspective,” “Explanation and argumentation,” and “The thematic thread.” Their development followed a blended learning approach, which integrates face-to-face and online learning phases, and draws on theories of computer-mediated communication, cognitive psychology and education. The

following aspects were considered when developing course contents, exercises, and teaching materials:

- Mode of communication: face-to-face vs. online
- Pedagogical practice: instructing (lecture) vs. detecting (group work)
- Types of knowledge: conceptual vs. procedural vs. meta (linguistic)
- Types of exercises: detecting, classifying, correlating, sequencing, abstracting, modifying, focused variation, and composing

These four dimensions constitute a matrix in which all intended course content can be located, and which allows the appropriate type of content presentation to be chosen. Thus, the course design as a whole is based on a theoretically reflected, interdisciplinary combination of relevant areas of scholarship. In order to keep dependence on the e-learning platform to a minimum, course materials were mainly developed as written manuals and as MS-PowerPoint presentations. The learning platform was only used for communication with and between students and for exercises.

The first instalment of the writing course was taught by two research assistants during the summer semester of 2008 at Vienna University. The whole course was evaluated by course participants via online feedback, questionnaires, and oral feedback at the end of the semester. Results of this feedback were used to redesign the entrance module and to implement slight changes in both the general and the two discipline specific modules.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE ACADEMIC WRITING COURSE

This project had consequences that go beyond the realm of academic research:

The teaching materials which were developed for modules one and two were used to produce an academic writing guide for German-speaking students of the Humanities and Social Sciences (Gruber, Huemer, & Rheindorf, 2009), which is intended to go further than many “how-to-do” writing books on the market currently. It provides readers with a short account of Merton’s conception of science as a social system and then tries to derive various characteristics of academic communication and academic style from this (admittedly idealized) conception.

Both research assistants developed a competence as academic writing trainers and received numerous requests for writing courses that were eventually offered at the following institutions: Department of Linguistics (Vienna University), Department of Social and Economic History (Vienna University), Department of Human Resource Development of Vienna University, Competence Centre

for the automobile industry (Villach), faculty of interdisciplinary research and advanced training (Klagenfurt University), writing centre of Klagenfurt University, and Department of Information Technology (Klagenfurt University).

Furthermore, in summer of 2008, the research team developed a detailed concept for a writing centre at Vienna University that was sent to all relevant administrative authorities of the university. Because the team anticipated that the university administration would not be able to cover all projected costs, they also contacted one of Austria's major banks and explored the possibility of external sponsorship there. As a matter of fact, the bank's public relation department showed an interest in financially supporting a writing centre, provided the university administration would also contribute their share. When the university officials met, the general feedback was positive, but the realisation of a writing centre was made dependent on the amount of funding the bank would provide. In the meantime, late September 2008 brought the international financial crisis to Austrian banks, and the bank withdrew their (oral) commitment to support a writing centre. As a consequence, the university administration no longer saw the whole project of a writing centre as realistic due to the general budgetary situation of the university.^z

IMPACT OF THE “BOLOGNA PROCESS” ON PLANS FOR THE WRITING CENTRE

However, since 2005, Vienna University has gradually implemented the new MA-BA-PhD study programs in the course of the so-called “Bologna process.” This means that the traditional tri-partite academic degree structure (“Magisterium” — “Doktorat” — “Habilitation”) with its rather relaxed time constraints for students (cf. above) has been replaced by a rather tightly pre-scheduled course system. But whereas in the Anglophone university system (from which this study architecture has been transferred) students often receive institutionalised writing support, this institutional framework is missing at Vienna University. Administration officials are aware of this problem, but—as mentioned above—the budget for a university-wide writing centre is not available. As a consequence, a first small version of institutionalised writing support was implemented in the new PhD program of Vienna University, which started in fall 2009. In this university-wide program, the two former research assistants teach several courses on various aspects of academic genres (writing a proposal, writing an abstract, etc.).

Apart from this small institutional success, the research team initiated an interdisciplinary working group at Vienna University, which comprises participants from the faculties of history, philology, education, and the centre for

translation studies interested in different aspects of students' academic writing. The working group set up an internet forum (<http://homepage.univie.ac.at/markus.rheindorf/php/>) in which teaching materials can be shared and which is intended to improve communication among interested faculty members of Vienna University. Furthermore, the group will organise regular meetings in which single members report on their current work.

CONCLUSION

Looking back on almost 10 years of research on students' academic writing and on the activities that have been intended to establish some practical consequences of this work, I cannot avoid having mixed feelings: On the one hand, the research group created some academic output in a research field that virtually did not exist in Austria before, and that group is now well integrated within the international research landscape (e.g., as part of COST action IS0703, <http://www.cost-lwe.eu>, which deals with improving writing on various levels in the European context). Furthermore, three former research assistants (Birgit Huemer, Markus Rheindorf, and Karin Wetschanow) teach academic writing courses in several institutions because they have been part of the academic writing research group. On the other hand, the degree of institutionalization of students' writing support at Vienna University is still low. Apart from the above-mentioned courses in the new PhD program, which is still in its early phases and some courses in MA study programs (linguistics, social and economic history), no institutional basis for students' writing support has been established so far. This might partly be due to the fact that Vienna University is by far the largest university in Austria, and with its 74,000 enrolled students resembles a supertanker which needs a very long time until it changes course.

NOTES

1. For the history and status of the seminar paper in the German university system see Kruse (2006) and also Foster (2002). Their accounts of the German university system hold—*mutatis mutandis*—also true for the Austrian university system.
2. This system has changed dramatically during the last years as Austrian universities had to introduce the BA-MA-PhD system in the course of the implementation of the so called “Bologna-study-architecture,” an EU program which intends to harmonize the tertiary education systems of the EU member states. I will shortly discuss the consequences of this new framework at the end of the article.

3. This latter view marks a sharp distinction between the SFL-view of genre pedagogy and the proponents of the “New Rhetoric” movement who are very pessimistic about the explicit teachability of genres.

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