

Becoming a post/graduate writer in a social science discipline

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Becoming a Post/graduate Writer in a Social Science Discipline

Clare Furneaux

Introduction

How does a student get from “*I was in the middle of nowhere when I came in this MA [Master of Arts] programme because I didn’t know how to write academic writing*” to “*I know that if I have enough time I can do anything*” a year later? These are the words of “Timur” a Turkish student whose first academic essay writing was judged by his tutor as being totally inadequate (despite a satisfactory internationally recognised language proficiency score). This chapter explores the experiences of a group of six students, including Timur, as they discovered, and learned to meet, the academic writing conventions on a British MA programme. Post/graduate-level study on Masters programmes is an under-researched area, yet increasing numbers of international students now travel to undertake this kind of study in other countries. This includes becoming post/graduate students in social science contexts with heavy academic literacy demands.. Studies such as this one can help the institutions and the teachers who welcome them to understand the challenges these students face, and support them in meeting those challenges.

Another previously unexplored focus is how students cope with academic writing demands at the beginning of their studies. This time of transition is crucial for student success, especially on the relatively short one-year Masters programmes we have in Britain. The more we can understand how students develop into academic writers at this time, the better we can advise both their teachers and their successors. At the university in question the academic year runs from October to September and is divided into three 10-week terms and a summer vacation period. The focus of this research was three Term One writing assignments; however, the research sought to contextualise first term experiences in the framework of the whole year of study. One role of early assignments was to help students develop the academic skills needed for writing up a 15,000-word research-based dissertation. All the writing students did throughout the year built up to this.

The chapter begins by setting the scene in terms of a short summary of background literature. It then describes the methodology (context, data sources, participants and data analysis) before turning to the findings. These start with discussion of what these students brought with them and their expectations of writing for the programme on arrival, before consideration of programme-related factors, and then participant-related factors: their levels of application, approaches to learning, motivation and response to feedback.

Research into writing

Beginning in the 1970s (see Nystrand, 2006), research has explored three overarching perspectives on writing: process, product and social practices. In addition, two movements have discussed different student groups. In North America, these two movements are seen as L1 (mother-tongue) composition and ESL (English as a Second Language). In Britain and Australia, the academic literacies movement has focused on

home students, usually from non-standard backgrounds where English may or may not be the mother-tongue. English for Academic Purposes (EAP), grounded in Applied Linguistics, has focused on international non-native English speaking students. Discussion here follows the British/Australian framework, which is more appropriate for the context.

Academic literacies

In the 1980s, a series of movements in different fields, especially education and sociology, turned against both behaviourist and cognitivist explanations of learning. New ways of thinking sought to turn the focus to the social and the cultural, calling for a shift from literacy defined in terms of the development of skills to one viewing literacy as a set of social practices within a social setting, which influences and forms those practices (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995).

The academic literacies movement within British higher education sought to explore the implications for understanding student learning, shifting the focus of most research into academic writing from cognitive models of writing (e.g., Flower and Hayes 1981) to a more cultural and social perspective (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). Findings indicated the variety of writing and feedback practices students experienced across a range of disciplines, influenced by contextual assumptions about what constituted valid knowledge. Institutional factors also affected the nature of a writer's and marker's power and authority, and were found to disadvantage and alienate non-traditional students (Lillis, 2001).

English for Academic Purposes

EAP research has focused on the challenges faced by international students coming into Anglophone universities from other educational contexts. Much L2 writing research has focused on writers' texts (products) (such as Coombs, 1986; Shaw & Liu, 1998). While this information is important, most researchers and practitioners (e.g., Hyland, 2009) today would also expect to focus on writers' processes and what they bring to the task. In addition, product-based genre-studies, while instructive in that they provide information about genuine academic texts, have tended to focus on manageable short pieces of discourse, such as introductions (Swales, 1990) or abstracts (Hyland & Tse, 2004). These are not overly useful when preparing students for major pieces of writing, such as research-based dissertations.

Research into post/graduate writing

Much of the research into post/graduate University writing has focused on doctoral study (Casanave & Li, 2008; Aitchison & Guerin, 2014). Two notable exceptions are Prior (1998) and Casanave (2002), both of whom include studies of Native (NES) and Non-Native English (NNES) speaking Masters-level writers on L2 education programmes.

As a teacher and researcher of university writing, I have increasingly come to see the three perspectives on writing mentioned above as overlapping: writing is a social practice whose process results in a written product which is both influenced by and can itself influence the social context and/or the writer's process. In addition, I would argue (agreeing with Wingate & Tribble, 2012) that the academic literacies movements and

EAP should also be more linked so that all students can benefit from their insights into the development of writing skills. In sum, all these perspectives and movements contribute to a current, composite view of writing that influenced this study.

Methodology

This was a case study, conducted in a UK Department of Applied Linguistics, with six students on two campus-based Masters programmes: the MA Applied Linguistics (MAAL) is for students with an interest in applied language studies, such as foreign language teaching or translation, while experienced TESOL teachers usually opt for the MA English Language Teaching (ELT). Both programmes constitute one year full-time study on campus.

In common with most UK universities (Lillis, 2001), the prevailing genre on these programmes is the academic essay, ranging from 2,000-4,000 words, and leading up to the 15,000-word dissertation. Before arrival students are asked to write a pre-course assignment (PCA) for formative feedback, which they submit early in Term One. In this first term they write assignments for core modules. In Terms Two and Three, students choose three optional modules and work towards the final research-based dissertation.

This study focused on the academic writing experiences of the participating students in their first four months on the programme as they produced three common assignments. The PCA showed participants' writing skills as the course began; the other two assignments represented different, but typical, "genres" in the field, and were submitted at different times. One focused on Second Language Acquisition—a theoretical module that required students to present and discuss a wide range of literature in relation to a chosen topic; the other was an assignment on Discourse Analysis that required analysis and discussion of chosen texts. Both, therefore, contributed to developing skills for writing research.

Data collection

Documentation was collected in the form of programme-specific guidelines, module-specific assignment input, module assignments and feedback. Study-specific research tools were also developed, including semi-scripted (Gillham, 2000) interviews with students and staff, which constitute the main sources of information here. Students were interviewed five times over the academic year about their on-going experiences of academic literacy practices on their programme, including their reactions to feedback on assignments. Examples of student interview questions were:

1. On the assignment script and feedback sheet, can you show me some examples of useful feedback (and explain why)?
2. What advice would you give future MA students about academic writing, based on doing this assignment?

There were also two questionnaires: pre-course, about previous experience of academic literacies; and one-year on, seeking reflections on the development of academic literacies post-graduation.

Participants

Six participating students were chosen to represent an equal balance across the two programmes and genders. The age range (21–33) and nationalities (British, Japanese, Polish, Romanian and Turkish) were broadly typical of recent MA groups. The participants were given pseudonyms beginning with the same letter as their nationality, for ease of reference: Barbara, Jinko, Jun, Pola, Razvan and Timur. All except Pola (who initially failed her dissertation) passed the MA at the first attempt.

Data analysis

Analysis began by writing a literacy history of each participant and recording their pre-MA experiences of writing. With detailed, repeated reading and examination of spoken data and written documents, I then wrote a summary for each participant’s experiences of the three Term One assignments and their reflections looking back after the dissertation submission. This iterative approach allowed the story of each student to unfold as a narrative.

The data summaries were then examined repeatedly for topics relating to writing issues; 32 were identified. Examination of these topics led to identification of five broader themes:

1. writing task constraints (with topics such as *time, the reader*);
2. meeting the criteria (*being critical, evidence*);
3. student writer strategies (*asking questions, writing process*);
4. resources drawn on in writing (*drawing on own teaching experience, appropriate reading*);
5. Personal perspectives (*reaction to marks/feedback, motivation*).

Factors in developing post/graduate writers

These six students were examined as a group to explore patterns and differences in their behaviour and attitudes, as revealed by the whole range of data collected.

Patterns across the group on arrival

Consideration of the individual participants reveals some commonalities and contrasts. Table 1 shows salient factors that help to explain their overall performance. It focuses on the beginning and the end points (in terms of performance) of the programme, highlighting the conundrum at the heart of this study: Why do some students with every advantage at the start do badly (such as Pola, and relative to his previous performance, Razvan) and others, with huge disadvantages to overcome, do well against all the odds (as illustrated here by Jun and Timur)? How do students with a head-start maintain it (such as Barbara and Jinko)?

Table 1

Background and experience components on arrival, by participant

Component	Participant
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	Barbara	Jinko	Razvan	Jun	Timur	Pola
Language teaching experience	••	••	••	••	••	•
Relevant academic background	••	••	••		•	••
Academic writing experience in mother tongue	••		•	•		•
Academic writing experience in English	••	••	••			••
Advanced language skills	••	•	••			••
Language learning experience	•	••	••	••	••	••
Overall performance	D	D	M	M	M	F

Key: •• = considerable experience/expertise; • = some experience/expertise
D= distinction (>70% average); M = merit (>60% average); F = fail (<50% or failed dissertation)

Obviously, all the participants met the basic academic, professional and language proficiency requirements for acceptance onto their MA programme. However, this masks the fact that they started with very different backgrounds and personal resources to exploit in their writing. Areas where all participants had relevant experience were language teaching and learning. However, as none of the students arrived knowing that academic discussion in the light of these professional/learning experiences was a requirement in most assignments, a shift in their personal epistemologies was necessary. Having identified this disciplinary requirement, they then had to learn how to do it.

In terms of relevant academic background and writing experience, Barbara, Razvan and Pola had the greatest beginning advantages, having recently studied and produced academic writing in Applied Linguistics. This was reflected in Barbara and Razvan achieving top marks in the first two assignments. Jinko was next in terms of advantages, with her appropriate academic background and EAP writing skills. However, her skills were rusty, and she took the first term to establish what was required for academic writing, producing distinction-level work from Term Two on. Jun and Timur, as Table 1 clearly shows, had enormous disadvantages; Jun had no background in the discipline and Timur had no academic writing experience. They both needed the whole year to develop their potential, and, as Timur ruefully noted at the year's end: *"I wish it was my first year [now] and I could do great works next year because I changed*

everything [...] and I know how to write it now". Pola had the same beginning advantages as Barbara and Razvan; her disappointing performance seemed to be primarily caused by an inability to develop beyond a more technical approach to writing learned in her undergraduate studies.

Expectations of programme writing requirements

The pre-course questionnaire (PCQ) revealed the enormous variation in the group's preparedness for study at this level on arrival. This variation encompassed understanding of what study at this level involves, in terms of their expectations of academic literacy requirements and the challenges they would face. The students who faced the greatest challenges showed least awareness of what was to come at the start of the programme, and no one was able to accurately identify the sources of support they ended up using.

The students most aware of the challenges ahead were Barbara and Razvan; Jinko and Pola overestimated the amount of writing, and Jun and Timur underestimated it. While they all appreciated that there would be a lot of reading, their understanding of what this meant also varied. Again, Timur stood out in terms of least accurate, predicting reading "10 essays a week". Jun was the only participant who made no reference to articles, indicating his initial lack of awareness of the need to read journal papers.

This questionnaire also asked students to anticipate what problems they would have with MA writing and this revealed further differences between better and weaker students at this early stage. The better students spoke of macro-issues (Jinko mentioned synthesising sources, for example). The weaker ones lacked this insight of what academic writing actually involved and focused instead on how much they disliked writing (Pola and Timur) and worried about language problems (this also included Jun).

Programme-related factors

In Table 2 below some other answers to the questions raised above begin to emerge. All participants struggled initially with certain aspects of the new discipline/context-specific genre requirements for writing. This corroborates a situated social view of academic literacies; academic essay genre requirements vary with context, and these students had to learn what was required within the disciplinary context of Applied Linguistics at this level and the situated context of these programmes.

Table 2

Programme factors by component and participant, in order of participant performance on the programme

Factor	Component	Participant					
		Barbara	Jinko	Razvan	Jun	Timur	Pola
Academic writing	Unfamiliarity with sections expected within assignments	x	x	x	x	x	x

genre challenges	Unsure how to use own teaching / learning experience in writing		x	x	x		x
	Concern over what being original meant	x	x	x			
	Difficulty being critical	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Over-use of quotations			x		x	
Role of academic writing	Developing understanding	x	x	x	x	x	
	Showing understanding						x
Writing process	Changed considerably over the year	x		x	x	x	
	Developed, but no fundamental change		x				
	No change						x
Role of academic reading	Model for own academic writing	x	x	x	x		
	Source of ideas that could be challenged	x	x	x	x	x	
	Source of new language		x		x	x	x

Key: x = factor present

Early issues for all participants related to writing task constraints, namely:

- Subdivision of assignments into specific sections, and when/how to be critical were challenges for everyone.
- As already mentioned, drawing on their own teaching/learning experiences in writing was unfamiliar for most people regardless of level, except for Timur, for whom it seemed to come naturally, and Barbara, who had experienced it on a previous course. Even she, however, arrived thinking this “*telling your own stories*” was not appropriate at Masters level.
- Only stronger students (Barbara, Jinko and Razvan) worried at all about originality.
- Both strong (Razvan) and weak (Timur) starters found themselves lacking a voice and relying too much on quotations.

The volume of writing and extended length of assignments demanded by the programme resulted in all five students who did well developing their writing processes over the year and coming to an appreciation of the important knowledge-transforming (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) role of writing, and the fact that writing improves with writing practice (as noted in Braine, 2002). Pola, in contrast, did not develop her writing, clinging instead to the more mechanical writing sub-processes and strategies (focusing on vocabulary acquisition, for example) from her undergraduate studies and to a simpler knowledge-telling approach to writing. Her writing did not improve with practice, which

indicates that doing writing is a necessary but not sufficient condition for writer development; awareness of the need to adapt and the ability to do so are also required.

These participants' use of the central resource of reading was also predictive of academic writing success. Reading provides "textual interaction" (Tardy, 2005, p. 336) and this study found, as Tardy's does, that this was a significant factor in building "subject-matter expertise and served as powerful influences on the writers' linguistic development, particularly in learning forms through borrowing strategies" (p. 336). All participants with language concerns at the start (everyone except Barbara and Razvan) rightly saw reading as a useful source of new language. Only Pola continued to focus on this throughout the programme. The others all moved on to view reading more as a source of new ideas they could develop and/or challenge. Everyone, again except Pola, realised the importance of academic reading in terms of helping them develop their writing skills (discussed in Carson & Leki, 1993). The successful students read as apprentice writers (as outlined in Bazerman, 1980), noting, for example, how expert writers tackled the tasks of presenting their survey of the literature and supporting their own opinions.

Having written their first assessed assignment, students waited anxiously for their marks. Feedback on early assessed assignments was a surprise to everyone. From programme briefings, these students knew that the marking criteria and marking scheme were different from what they had experienced before, either at undergraduate level, and/or in their home countries. International students saw the British marking scheme as "severe" (Jun's description); in all the other countries represented here, any grade below 70% (the UK distinction-level) is considered very weak. As Jinko pointed out, experiencing the system was "totally different" from being briefed on it. The shock of getting marks much lower than they were used to was, of course, greatest at the beginning. Everyone was taken aback by their first mark; Barbara was pleasantly surprised with what her British undergraduate experience told her was a high mark (67%), but the other participants were shocked. Their comments on their first marks were also indicative of their different attitudes to study; for example, Razvan (with 68%) was "very disappointed with myself" and Jun was somewhat indignant with 55% after positive feedback on a linked class presentation, but accepted the grade, vowing to work harder: "I am really ambitious to get higher score [...] I know I can't do it well now, so I will do it more".

Although participants were puzzled by the marking scheme, and this continued to the end of the programme, the picture that emerges is of students accepting whatever mark they were given. Beyond raising it with me when explicitly asked, no one ever sought to challenge the degree classification bands or to use the marking criteria to question grades as students with an academic literacies (Lillis, 2001) or a Critical EAP (Benesch, 1993) viewpoint might have done. For these confident professionals this was not because of any perception of students' institutional inferior status, but because they accepted the status-quo as part of their experience of being Masters students in Britain.

Level of application

Everyone predicted that the programme would involve a considerable amount of work. The focus in Term One tended to be on doing the set reading, with Barbara, Razvan,

Timur and Pola reporting that they had not allowed enough time for writing. This experience led to a better reading–writing time balance for later assignments. The amount of reading work done by these participants varied, however. At one extreme were Jinko and Jun, who reported hours of daily preparatory and follow-up reading for classes. They were able to use bibliographies to identify sources that would help with these tasks. Timur’s approach was very different, and less organised, than the other two’s, with more of a strategic focus on identifying and developing writing skills than content knowledge. At the other extreme was Pola, who admitted she did not find the MA workload as challenging as her undergraduate degree. This was not, I believe, because she was “lazy” or unmotivated, but because she did not appreciate the level of independent work and development of critical understanding required.

Approaches to learning

These students approached their learning in different ways. It is evident, however, that as a group their overall approach to learning on the programme was more from a constructivist than a social constructivist point of view. Constructivism (Fox, 2001) posits that people learn by individually making cognitive links between what they know and encounter; social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) argues that this is done with others. Interviews revealed that only Timur here relied heavily on others for any core learning, and this was in relation to academic writing, not curriculum content. The other students who acknowledged receiving considerable help (Jun and Jinko) were the two with serious language problems, and they recognised their need for help at this more micro-level. Although all participants learned from their interaction with tutors, most of them reported this as minimal, limited by staff availability. Very little learning, however, took place with other students on the MA programme. Most students clearly studied and learned alone, especially in Term One, when the gaps between stronger and weaker students were perhaps too wide to allow them to construct knowledge together.

A useful concept when discussing approaches to learning is that of “theories of action” (Argyris & Schön, 1974), which posits that people have mental maps that guide them in how to act in situations, and influence how they review these actions. There is a split between:

- “theory-in-use”: what people actually do; and
- “espoused theory”: what people say influences them.

The distinction is helpful because it encourages reflection on how far behaviour “fits” espoused theory, and whether beliefs affect behaviour. Argyris (1980) argues that effective behaviour results from developing congruence between theory-in-use and espoused theory. Students here who had a high degree of congruence were Barbara, Jinko, Jun and Timur. They practised what they preached in terms of levels and ways of studying. For Razvan and Pola there was less congruence. For example, they expressed great appreciation for feedback on their writing, but admitted that they had made little use of it.

Motivation

Motivation is a major factor in academic success, and a source of much research and debate. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) argue that research has produced a complex “motivational palette” (p. 4), with cognitive and emotional dimensions, and that such research is increasingly influenced by a growing recognition of the importance of social context as well as the more traditional individualistic perspective. Table 3 below focuses on one aspect of motivation, borrowing Gardner’s (1985) notion of instrumental (i.e., practical) orientation from Applied Linguistics. This is now seen as somewhat out-dated within the discipline (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), but it reflects the current UK educational discourse of education and employability (e.g., Baker, 2011).

Table 3

Influences on participants’ instrumental motivation in order of performance on the programme

Component	Participant					
	Barbara	Jinko	Razvan	Jun	Timur	Pola
Future study		x	x			
Up-grade in level of teaching (school to University)		x			x	
Interest in EAP teaching post	x				x	
No specific ambition				x		x

Key x - factor present

Table 3 shows that there was no link between these students’ primary reasons for choosing to do an MA and their academic performance. Students who did well had different practical motivations on registering, ranging from future study (Razvan and Jinko) to career development (Barbara, Jinko and Timur) to Jun’s lack of specific ambition, but interest in developing his professional knowledge. Like Jun, Pola had no future plans. During the year, none of these participants mentioned practical motivations in interviews unless asked, and it seemed their focus was very much on the here-and-now of doing each piece of work successfully.

The participants in this study can be described in terms of other forms of motivation. Bandura’s (1994) discussion of self-efficacy is particularly useful. Perceived self-efficacy is “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce effects” (Bandura

1994, p.71); it influences a person's sense of themselves, their motivation and behaviour. Bandura identifies four sources of this belief, which are helpful in interpreting the behaviour of these participants:

- a. **Mastery experiences (performing a task successfully)** Their success in writing (in terms of marks and feedback on work) led to increased confidence in everyone in the group, except Pola. For the others, success bred success; this was especially true for the weakest students, Jun and Timur.
- b. **Social modelling (seeing others succeed)** This group experienced very little social modelling. There was almost no discussion of their performance or exchange of work with classmates.
- c. **Social persuasion by others that one can succeed** This came mainly from tutors, not each other. The student everyone said would do well because she was a British EAP teacher, Barbara, was in fact intimidated and isolated by this expectation, seeing it as meaning no one would appreciate any worries she had.
- d. **Psychological responses to stress** These students managed their stress extremely well in the academically challenging first term, when workload pressure was greatest and everything was unfamiliar; only Jun had to ask for an assignment deadline extension. Students told me about the pressures they were under in interviews, but mostly in factual workload terms, not complaint.

One focus of motivation is how it is affected by the value of the task undertaken. This is obviously a major factor in high-stakes Masters programmes. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 18) summarise the comprehensive model of task values (drawing on Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; and Eccles, 2005) as:

1. attainment value: “the personal importance of mastering a skill and doing well on a task”;
2. intrinsic value: “interest [...] enjoyment coming from performing an activity”;
3. extrinsic utility value: “awareness of how well a task relates to current and future goals and what role learning plays in improving the quality of one's life or making one a better person”;
4. cost: “the negative value component [...] expended effort and time [...] and various emotional costs such as anxiety and fear of failure”.

The group studied here was broadly coherent in terms of the first and last values above. They all attached importance to doing well on programme tasks, but defined this differently, according to their self-perception—for Razvan, 60% on his dissertation was disastrous, whereas Timur was delighted with 64% for his. No one raised any task value cost of doing his or her MA in terms of complaint about expended time or anxiety. This is not surprising as they all arrived expecting a high level of challenge.

Intrinsic value is one aspect that varied across the group. The only two students who expressed pleasure in their learning of specific aspects of the programme were

Razvan and Jun. They also had experience of enjoying writing, publishing online as a hobby outside academia. In stark contrast, Timur and Pola both disliked any kind of writing on arrival. Pola's view of writing did not change over the year, but Timur's was transformed by his success.

Extrinsic utility value was clearly a factor for all, though of differing significance, given their individual ambitions. All participants, except Pola, made links between what they were learning on the programme and their future work in terms of the qualification itself (Razvan and Jinko) and/or of the knowledge, skills and/or insights gained on the programme. Pola was doing an MA as it was expected in her family. She had the weakest motivation, therefore, in that it was unrelated to the specific programme (presumably any MA would have sufficed).

What this group of students seems to confirm is that a general, extrinsic motivation is not enough; motivation needs to be more specific to the programme of study. In order to succeed on a challenging academic programme, students need to see how it can benefit them. That should be a given on programmes with a clear professional link such as the MAs here; however, it is still possible for a student to fail to make that connection and so to not develop enough, as in Pola's case.

Response to feedback

On these programmes, assignment feedback from tutors was the main locus of interaction between staff and students on their writing. While there was some spoken and written dialogue around outlines and face-to-face discussion of the formative PCA, written feedback on assessed work typified the university monologism that is part of the essayist literacy tradition described by Kachru (2006) and that Lillis (2001) is so critical of.

All participants said they appreciated the feedback they received. However, they also reported varying reactions to and use of feedback. Barbara and Jinko found the feedback on specific aspects of later texts (e.g., "*your justification for using the analytical [discourse analysis] framework was sound*") more useful than the generic comments received on the pre-course assignment from personal tutors (e.g., "*Evidence of good cohesion across paragraphs*"). Weaker writers relied on such feedback for guidance on general academic writing conventions (e.g., citations). For Timur, for example, his personal tutor's generic feedback on his "*rubbish*" (Timur's description) writing for the first formative assignment was the wake-up call that alerted him to his woeful lack of knowledge of academic writing conventions.

Razvan and Pola, as already noted, made limited use of feedback after an initial reading. Razvan attributed this to the fact that "*I don't take criticism very well*", but added he hoped he incorporated suggestions "*in my writing repertoire subconsciously*", which subsequent writing indicated was the case. Pola, however, misinterpreted some of the feedback she received, for example seeing questions (e.g., "*Do Polish learners tend to transfer all the features of Polish? If not, why not?*") about her SLA assignment as genuine requests for information, rather than challenges to her argument. Jinko and Jun, in contrast, showed a real respect for feedback, spending a considerable amount of time reviewing it, highlighting specific points. Noticing (i.e., consciously registering) is acknowledged by applied linguists as a necessary condition for learning (in Schmidt's

1990 Noticing Hypothesis), and Jun echoes this, speaking of “*the effect of feedback on noticing what I couldn’t find, what I couldn’t do [...] so it’s really important*”. Both these participants also looked back at previous feedback when working on Term Two assignments. Timur relied less heavily on feedback for guidance in his academic writing; although he studied the feedback carefully when he received it, he did not re-visit it when working on later assignments.

Literacy brokers

Consideration of students’ sources of support led me to the important concept of “literacy brokers” which Lillis and Curry (2006, p. 4) define as people who “mediate text production”. They point out that there is little research into “the nature and impact of brokering academic writing in any context” (p. 4), and this study supports the view that this is a major omission.

This group turned to a variety of people for support in their writing, and used them in very different ways. Broadly, their literacy brokers can be divided into non-programme-related and programme-related. The former included students on other programmes (drawn on heavily and to great effect by Timur, who befriended a star undergraduate finalist for expert advice on academic writing in British universities), other international post/graduates and family members (both used to no, or negative, effect by Pola). Programme-related supporters mostly consisted of academic staff (used by all, to varying degrees), with some limited support from classmates for some (e.g., as proofreaders by Jun).

Conclusion

In answering our opening question: “*How do post/graduate students develop an understanding of the writing demands of the academy in the early stages of their study?*”, the short answer to this is: by doing writing for their particular academy, with all that this entails in terms of developing context-appropriate skills in academic literacies, and by receiving and acting upon advice from appropriate sources. The study revealed the resources these six students drew on as they learned what the writing requirements of their programmes were. Some of these were personal to themselves (their academic, writing and professional backgrounds, their expectations of the programme, their application and approach to learning, and to feedback). Others, however, were related to the programme itself and this is where the student’s ability to notice what was important affected their performance, especially with regard to the context of the writing tasks (especially the academy’s expectations as outlined in marking criteria). How they used the academic and human resources available to them was also crucial.

This study lends itself to development into other areas: clearly, the study could be extended to later parts of the research writer’s journey, with detailed study of the dissertation write-up. This could include following the impact of feedback on subsequent writing more directly than was possible here. The experiences of students in different discipline areas could also be studied in a similar way, as could the tutor’s experience. Research in all these areas is vital if we are to develop appropriate post/graduate writing pedagogies for our twenty-first century academic writers.

The last words here, as the opening ones, belong to Timur. On hearing of his dissertation mark and overall result he emailed: “*I think today is the happiest day of my life. Finally I passed it!*” This study revealed the amount of effort, resources and progress encapsulated in that word “finally”.

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