Research in Progress

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BAAL/CUP Seminars 2010

Academic writing in the 21st century: Theories and methods for investigating, describing and explaining academic texts and literacy practices

The Open University, Milton Keynes, 21 April 2010

This seminar, organised by Caroline Coffin and Jim Donohue (both from the Open University, UK), took the form of a day of dialogue between invited experts and other interested parties, including academic writing practitioners, researchers and postgraduate students. The invited speakers were asked to form panels representing either Academic Literacies or Systemic Functional Linguistics.

The principal aims of the seminar were:

- to progress the dialogue between exponents of two major approaches to the researching of academic writing: ACADEMIC LITERACIES and SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS
- to develop awareness and understanding of how different paradigms, methodologies and epistemologies influence conceptions of, and research into, 'academic writing'
- to create an opportunity for reflecting on how best to investigate the nature of academic writing
- to create links between theory and pedagogy

Whilst recognizing that some of our speakers embodied syntheses of both approaches, in order to facilitate dialogue, all were asked to orient participants to key concepts and features that characterise the approach they were representing.

1. Rationale for the seminar

Over the last 15 years two approaches have come to the fore (one primarily in the UK, the other primarily in Australia), each with its own distinct epistemological and ideological stance towards the study of academic writing, as outlined below.

1. Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) approaches (as exemplified in Ravelli & Ellis 2004; Donohue 2009). The primary focus is on text structure and linguistic choices and how these affect, and are affected by, their cultural and social context. To date, much of the research has focused on ways of making meaning across different academic subject areas and disciplines.

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2. Academic Literacies approaches (as set out in Lillis & Scott 2007; Lillis 2008). In this approach, text is not the primary analytical focus. Instead, an important object of investigation is participants' (students' and tutors') practices. Emphasis is placed on participants' explanations of their texts and of the practices they employ.

By bringing together experts in and exponents of the two approaches outlined above, we wished to interrogate the theoretical and/or ideological tenets underlying each approach and so understand and appraise what each framework illuminates and obscures.

2. The seminar

The day began with a brainstorm as to what is meant by the words making up the names of each approach: *academic, literacies, systemic, functional, linguistics*. Preliminary thoughts that emerged from the brainstorm, and which were returned to as points of debate throughout the day, can be summarised as follows:

- Academic Literacies raises important and influential questions about how students and tutors are positioned within the academy, both in the disciplines and in writing development situations.
- SFL offers insight into how language functions as a resource and provides an analytical and practical tool for students and tutors in pedagogic situations.

The histories and goals of each approach were the subject of the next stage in the dialogue, with Mary Lea (The Open University) providing a summary for Academic Literacies and Caroline Coffin (The Open University) highlighting key aspects of SFL.

Following the orientation phase of the seminar, Roz Ivanic (University of Lancaster), Sheena Gardner (University of Birmingham), Theresa Lillis (The Open University) and Jim Donohue (The Open University) moved on to explore key concepts, namely CONTEXT, TEXT, PRACTICES, TEXT PRODUCERS AND TEXT CONSUMERS. The purpose of this in-depth conceptual exploration was to better understand how the different theoretical underpinnings of each approach lead to quite different understandings and uses of a 'similar sounding' set of concepts. As the discussion unfolded it became very clear that there was resonance and similarity across the two approaches as well as ongoing debate and difference.

In the afternoon session, three speakers (whose abstracts had been selected in our call for papers) presented papers on the relationship between research and practice. Mary Lea's paper, 'Writing for assessment in practice-based courses: the case of university teachers', reported on a project investigating the tensions between professional practice-based knowledge and the formal written assessment of that knowledge in relation to course concepts and theory. Jackie Tuck (a postgraduate student at the Open University) then presented her findings on 'Subject tutor practice surrounding student writing in UK Higher Education'. In particular, she used a 'curious' rather than an 'evaluative' gaze to focus on tutor feedback comments and marking practices, drawing on a range of qualitative data. The final paper – 'The integration of SFL and Academic Literacies in a disciplinary context' – was presented by

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John Wrigglesworth (University of Portsmouth), also on behalf of co-author Mary McKeever (University of Portsmouth). A key focus of this paper was the use of SFL to research the language and habits of mind of particular discourse communities, with genre being used to show patterns of language use in texts. The final event was a whole group discussion (expertly guided by Tom Bartlett of the University of Cardiff) in response to key questions that had been raised by the morning's discussions. This was drawn to a conclusion by Sally Mitchell (Queen Mary, University of London), our discussant, who observed: 'A hung parliament is not, after all, the same thing as a coalition government'. In other words, mere co-existence of the two approaches is no substitute for the proactive engagement that is called for if they are to take advantage of each other's strengths and live in a productive relationship.

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Using corpus evidence in the classroom: Working with teachers and learners

University of Birmingham, 24–25 June 2010

The event (co-ordinated by Alison Sealey and Paul Thompson, University of Birmingham) was divided so that the first day focused mainly on the use of corpus-informed teaching with L1 learners and the second on additional language teaching contexts.

Paul Thompson (University of Birmingham) opened the seminar with an overview of published reports on uses of corpus evidence and approaches in teaching about language, in L1 and L2 classrooms. The second speaker was Alison Sealey (University of Birmingham), who described some of the findings from the ESRC funded study 'Corpus-based learning

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