


Chapter 1

The Significance of Teaching Academic Writing as a Discipline-Specific Skill

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to popularize the conscious initiation of novice scholars and postgraduate students into the writing conventions of their disciplines. In so doing, the study proposes the integration of writing courses into the disciplinary syllabus so that the students study writing developmentally throughout their stay in the faculty. A questionnaire, and an interview, were used to collect data from the study participants, who were lecturers and teaching assistants in different Sudanese higher education institutions. Data analysis revealed that the participants highly value the proposal to teach academic writing as a discipline-specific skill. It also showed significant differences in the participants' perceptions of explicit instruction of academic writing based on their disciplinary affiliation in favour of hard science specialists. However, the participants' research profiles did not show statistically different perceptions.

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of this paper arose out of a training course on academic writing organized by Khartoum University Advanced Training Centre (KUATC) and the English Language Institute (ELI) in the same University in Sudan. The course was part of a comprehensive training program that aimed at introducing Teaching Assistants and Lecturers (who were in the service of the University) to English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The course did not result from an analysis of students' need for EAP skills as is the standard practice. They were simply conceived to require advanced academic writing skills to improve the quality of the dissertations and proposals they were drafting. Fortunately, the course turned out to be highly relevant to the candidates' needs as evidenced by their enthusiasm for contributing to the extended classroom discussions, insightful solutions to the course tasks, engaging mini-presentations, and request for additional training to be organized in the future. Also, candidates who had been exempted from attending the course sessions as they already had acquired academic writing conventions through their multiple publications still decided to stay the course. What is more, trainees from the English departments were initially reluctant to enroll in the program for fear that it would repeat content that they had already studied in both under- and postgraduate courses. However, in the end they asserted that they had been mistaken in prejudging it.

Historically, most candidates studied English as a required university subject. On average, it consisted of two modules taught in the first and second semesters of the first academic year. The first module was a remedial program offered to facilitate the transition from secondary to tertiary English syllabus. By contrast, the second module was an ESP-based program intended to introduce the students to the English variety specific to their disciplines. However, given the fact that most disciplines were taught through the medium of Arabic at the bachelor level, it was apparent that both modules did serve no specific purpose since as reported in Ezza & Al-Jarrallah (2015, p. 176) the acquisition of ESP skills aims primarily to "overcome academic problems caused by the use of English as a medium of instruction."

In the light of the vital role that writing plays in the academia in the manner reported above, this paper maintains that academic authorities at the University of Khartoum should consider integrating it longitudinally into the disciplinary syllabus as a follow-up or a substitute for the existing English course taught as a required university subject. Many local and universal practices can be invoked in support of the proposal. On the local level, even in the absence of systematic training in the conventions of academic writing, online research forums, e.g., researchgate.net, academia.edu, etc., indicate that young Sudanese scholars are actively contributing to the advancement of knowledge through their highly cited scientific research. This research mentality is equally true of the EAP trainees at KUATC and ELI

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