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Drawing on Theories of Critical Academic Literacies in the ELI 83 Classroom

Through this research, I investigate ways of supporting students' development of L2 academic literacies. In particular, I focus on the teaching and learning of English academic literacies in graduate school. My goals are (1) to deepen my knowledge of the theories and research on critical literacies and writing development and (2) to identify ways that these theories may be drawn on in the classroom to promote a critical awareness of academic discourse, while helping students acquire that discourse on their own terms. This paper provides an explanation of theories of critical academic literacies, a review of the goals of the curriculum under study, and a discussion of ways these theories may be drawn on in the classroom. Materials based on theories of critical academic literacies could be piloted in classes and could potentially become part of the critical academic writing textbook the ELI is creating.

Through my experience teaching English academic writing and researching critical literacies in EAP contexts, I have identified a few primary concerns: (1) the conflict that L2 students often experience when confronted with academic discourses, (2) the importance of helping students gain access to these discourses, and (3) the development of adaptive, dialogic pedagogies that respond to these concerns in ways that engage students' voices, knowledge, and interests.

Negotiating the Self in Academic Discourse

The acquisition of academic literacies requires new ways of negotiating the self in

relation to academic discourse. This process of negotiation and positioning can be fraught with conflict, as students may feel ambivalence towards academic English as a dominant discourse. For students who are learning English as a second language, academic English is often seen as “a threat to their identity and an incomprehensible form of expression to which they have little or no access” (Davis et al., in press, p. 14). A central question is how teachers of academic English may help students acquire the dominant discourse without sacrificing their voices or identities. A major goal of this research is to identify approaches to teaching academic discourse that value students’ multiple literacies and thus allow students to appropriate academic English on their own terms.

Particularly when academic norms conflict with values that student writers identify with, the appropriation of academic discourse can be a challenge to identity (Her, to appear). Looking back on her development of academic literacy, González (1997) writes,

it has been a treacherous journey, replete with detours, often ricocheting from one side of the academic fence to the other, while pushing forth to forge an identity, both personal and academic. It is only now in retracing and reflecting on this experience that I can label the dilemmas with which I struggled. Because academic language use and its attendant ideology had distanced me in some ways from my own community, I struggled with voicing that which was experiential. (pp. 318-319)

In their English academic writing, ESL writers may be called upon to enact identities that feel unfamiliar or forced. Shen (1989) explains that in the process of learning to write in English, he had to gain a new understanding of the self. His writing teachers’ advice was to “be yourself” and to assert his own perspective in his essays. However, as Shen (1989) writes, “To be truly ‘myself,’ which I knew was a key to my success in learning English composition, meant *not to be my Chinese self* at all. That is to say, when I write in English I have to wrestle with and abandon (at least temporarily) the whole system of ideology which previously defined me in myself” (p. 125; emphasis in original).

In addition to the concept of self in academic writing, the notions of voice and authority are useful in addressing the development of academic literacies. Canagarajah (2004) defines voice as “a manifestation of one’s agency in discourse through the means of language” (p. 267). Voice is linked to self and identity in that it is the presentation of self through spoken or written language. To claim a voice in academic writing is also to claim authority, or the power to assert one’s knowledge and views.

Engaging Critical Literacies through EAP Curricula

ESL students may have rich knowledge of the literacy practices of their own communities and educational backgrounds; however, the literacy practices of U.S. universities may not acknowledge or value the experiences that students bring with them. Thus, ESL students are often positioned as inferior or remedial through an emphasis on what they lack (Rivera, 1999), which is constructed as their “language problem” (Zamel, 1995). This perspective devalues the knowledge that these students have as multilingual, multicultural members of the academic community. Canagarajah (2002) emphasizes that multilingual students’ backgrounds and their differences from L1 students should not be perceived as a “deficit” or as indicative of an inability to acquire English academic discourse (p. 13).

Lillis (2003) discusses how the dominant, “authoritative” discourse of academia, plus the pedagogical practices that reinforce this discourse, may “thwart opportunities for a higher education premised upon inclusion and diversity” (p. 192). She advocates writing pedagogy that discloses, critiques, and “plays with” the dominant discourse, thus allowing space for alternative forms of meaning making. In EAP contexts, this could mean exposing and questioning the values that English academic discourse represents, rather than treating them as natural and

preferable. Such an approach may help students learn English academic writing conventions while realizing that these conventions are not universal, but contextual. Teaching that emphasizes a single ‘correct’ way of writing does students a disservice by presenting academic discourse as monolithic (Zamel, 1993). Instead, literacy instruction may help students acquire the language of the university by guiding them through the process of analyzing this language, including its different forms and functions, and the values that it represents.

Critical literacy practices have the explicit goal of achieving change in the individual and society and challenging the status quo (Shor, 1999). In the context of the ESL writing class, this may involve exploring to what extent students may move within and beyond academic writing conventions. Given their marginalized position in the university (Zamel, 1995), how might ESL students claim the language of power as their own while infusing it with their particular voices and knowledge? Part of taking a critical approach to L2 literacy pedagogy involves helping students negotiate the tension between convention and innovation, and discover the options they have for expressing themselves based on their goals in the different reading and writing situations they encounter.

The Bakhtinian notion of ideological becoming reveals how the tension learners feel with regard to academic discourse can be part of a positive and creative learning experience. Freedman and Ball (2004) explain ideological becoming as “how we develop our way of viewing the world, our system of ideas, what Bakhtin calls an ideological self” (p. 5). The process of ideological becoming involves the tension between what Bakhtin refers to as authoritative discourses and internally persuasive discourses (Freedman & Ball, 2004). Authoritative discourses are the powerful, official discourses that are accepted as given, whereas internally persuasive discourses are everyday, personal, unacknowledged discourses that individuals hold

(Bakhtin, 1981 as cited in Freedman & Ball, 2004). In language and literacy pedagogy, Freedman and Ball (2004) argue that tension between authoritative discourses and internally persuasive discourses is key to learning and growth. As students encounter and negotiate the authoritative discourses of academia, juxtaposing them with their own internally persuasive discourses, they shape their own ideologies and define their positions in relation to their discourse communities. To support students' growth, teachers may engage this process of ideological becoming and make it explicit in their literacy courses.

Morgan and Ramanathan (2005) identify four key aspects of “a critical literacy ‘tool kit’ in action” (p. 156) that can be applied to EAP courses:

1. The use of narratives/autobiographies to link personal experiences with socio-historical and institutional power relations.
2. The juxtaposition of texts in ways that question and subvert received disciplinary knowledge.
3. The pluralization and denaturalization of dominant cultural codes and historical representations.
4. Use of multimodal, semiotic strategies. (pp. 156-159)

These four points emphasize the importance of engaging students' voices and identities, challenging established knowledge, and valuing multiple ways of learning and knowing.

Multimodal pedagogies value diverse ways of learning, not only through the written modes of texts, but also through spoken, visual, and performative modes, drawing on multimedia materials, including books, photographs, plays, audio and video recordings, and web sites (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2004; also see Kress, 2003 and Stein, 2004). Morgan and Ramanathan (2004) point out that teachers of critical literacies make use of these multiple resources not only for the sake of variety, but also because “each text type will engage identities and the imagination in provocative ways unmet through other textual resources” (p. 158).

Few models of pedagogical applications of critical academic literacy theories exist; however, Skarin's (to appear) development of a curriculum for Generation 1.5 students at a community college in Hawai'i is a useful example. Skarin (to appear) created a curriculum that "endeavors to begin the process of apprenticing students into academic discourse, while legitimizing and providing heuristics for the critical consumption of the 'texts' [students] are required to 'read' inside and outside of college in order to gain cultural capital" (p. 5). The curriculum Skarin outlines helps students gain the tools and strategies they need to acquire academic discourse and examine it critically so as to "resist their own subordination" (p. 14). Drawing on theories of critical discourse analysis and students-as-ethnographers, Skarin shows how students may become "novice ethnographers of their college communities of practice" and investigate the textual, rhetorical, and discursive practices of academia (p. 15). In their final research papers, students reported the results of their analyses, and their papers could be written in the voices students chose (Standard American English or Hawai'i Creole English were both possibilities). In these ways, Skarin aimed to engage the languages and identities of her students, while developing their awareness of the social, political, and practical significance of academic discourse and writing genres.

Kramer-Dahl (2001) offers another example of how these theories may be applied to teaching. In her critical reading and writing course for university students in Singapore, Kramer-Dahl engaged with students' experiences of and resistance to academic discourse. As she explains, "Rather than merely socialising the students into their particular academic discourse communities, the course sought to invite them to interrogate the textual practices of these communities and to construct alternative texts" (Kramer-Dahl, 2001, p. 14). Kramer-Dahl points out that students are often not positioned as "apprentices" to academic knowledge; rather, they

are expected to reiterate and display the knowledge that is valued in academic circles. The course aimed to help students investigate “what counts as effective reading and writing” (Kramer-Dahl, 2001, p. 17) and how literacy practices vary across contexts. Through their analysis of the writing required for their university courses, many students in the course found that “what eventually counted in an assignment was conformity, not engagement and commitment” (p. 27). This common experience with academic discourse in higher education points to the need to question the positions that students are expected to occupy in their writing.

The Context

In light of the theories and research described above, I review the context of the course under study, focusing on its goals and curriculum. My intent is to identify ways of drawing on theories of critical academic literacies to support the existing course goals and curriculum. ELI 83 is an advanced academic writing course designed specifically for international graduate students at the University of Hawai‘i. Students enrolled in ELI 83 are diverse in terms of their fields of study and linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Most students in the course are required to take it based on their ELI placement test scores; however, some students choose to take ELI 83 of their own accord. As with other ELI courses (with the exception of ELI 100), students do not receive course credit or a grade for ELI 83. The following course description is provided to students on the syllabus:

ELI 83 is designed for graduate students at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa who need to develop their academic writing abilities in English as an additional language. Students in this course will explore academic writing in their disciplines, develop clarity of written expression, and improve command over textual, rhetorical, and discursive conventions common in academic writing. Students will also apply the different tasks that are associated with the writing process to various writing situations. By the end of this course, students should be prepared for independent academic writing at the graduate level. (Messer, 2004a)

The central component of the ELI 83 curriculum is the Convention Analysis Project (CAP) (Talmy & Faucette, 2003a). The CAP is a series of short (1-2 page) papers that culminates in a final (8-10+ page) primary research paper. The nine parts of the CAP are designed to guide students through the process of investigating, analyzing, and reporting on the writing conventions of their fields. Students collect and examine various documents from their academic departments (e.g., course syllabi, assignment guidelines, model student papers), conduct meta-analyses of articles published in the predominant journals of their fields, and interview a professor or senior graduate student in their department. The CAP assignments have two main goals: (1) for students to identify and explore the various writing conventions of their fields and (2) for students to practice and improve their writing through multiple drafts. Thus, the CAP is essentially writing about writing. In the final research paper, students review and explain what they have learned about writing in their areas of study.

My aim in this research is to draw on theories of literacy, identity, power, and agency to develop materials that support the CAP and the goals of ELI 83. There are concerns among ELI 83 teachers that the CAP can lead students to see these writing conventions as the preferred, superior way to write, and therefore not question them. The creators of the CAP, Steven Talmy and Priscilla Faucette, point out this important caveat in their guidelines for teachers:

[ELI 83 teachers] should not *reify* writing conventions (put them on a pedestal to admire and obey) and tell students they must strictly adhere to them no matter what. A major point of the CAP is for students to start to attend to features of written discourse they might not otherwise attend to, so that they can ultimately reach an informed decision about whether this particular convention or that one is one they will/not employ in their own writing. In other words, the CAP, without a caveat such as this, could easily be construed as a conservative, prescriptive exercise. That is not what we intend. (Talmy & Faucette, 2003b, p. 3)

As Talmy and Faucette explain, writing conventions are dynamic; they change over time and across contexts, and they are often debated. Writing conventions are defined as “sociohistorically situated constructs that members of particular discourse communities more or less agree upon at a particular time/place” (Talmy & Faucette, 2003b, p. 3). The ELI 83 curriculum is based on the assumption that it is important for international graduate students to be aware of the ways of writing that are common (and often revered) in their departments. With this knowledge, students can choose whether to follow these discipline-specific conventions depending on their own goals and the contexts of their writing.

What is needed, then, are materials that ELI 83 teachers can use to help engage these concepts, so that writing conventions are not unintentionally reified, and so that students’ knowledge and voices are openly valued and not suppressed under the weight of dominant discourses. Her (to appear) shows how three Korean graduate students in a TESOL program “initially perceived [themselves] in subordinate positions vis-à-vis the new academic discourse [they] encountered” (p. 19). According to Her, this encounter calls for students to “come to terms with new ways of making sense of literacy practices that may be at odds with their familiar and desired ways of being” (p. 1). In the process of learning dominant academic discourses, students’ knowledge and identities may be challenged and devalued. For these reasons, it is essential for writing teachers to create opportunities for academic discourse and writing conventions to be grappled with in the classroom, rather than reifying them or taking a neutral, relativistic stance towards them.

According to Canagarajah (2002), approaches to teaching academic writing that do not acknowledge the power and conflict involved in academic discourse are problematic because they “[ignore] the threat multilingual students may face in being repressed or alienated by the

academic discourse. These approaches fail to interrogate how knowledge and discourse conventions can themselves be ideological and foster inequality and domination” (p. 38). Canagarajah (2002) critiques approaches to teaching writing that acknowledge discourse variation but that do not examine the values and ideologies that such discourse represents. He goes on to argue that these views of writing pedagogy assume “an internalization of the values, culture, and knowledge of the respective disciplines as a necessary condition in order to communicate successfully with scholars” (p. 41).

In my ELI 83 class last semester, several students took the position that it is necessary to follow established writing conventions in order to write well. In a discussion of the purpose of discourse conventions, many students said that conventions were necessary for clear communication among members of an academic field. From this perspective, conventions are general ‘rules’ that scholars agree to follow for the good of the academic community, and to show respect for established knowledge and ways of writing. However, one student raised the point that innovation is also considered valuable, and that not all writers within a field write the same. An ethnomusicology student pointed out that interdisciplinary fields such as her own do not have such established conventions, but rather draw on the traditions of other fields to shape their own ways of researching and writing. I believe this discussion helped members of the class acknowledge alternative positions on writing conventions. Despite this awareness of alternatives, many students came to the conclusion that it is necessary and desirable to write according to discourse conventions. Since students devote a good deal of effort to researching and writing about the conventions of their fields for the CAP, it makes sense that they would view them as valuable. In addition, recognizing that they are often positioned as novices (in their fields of study, in academic writing, and in English discourse) would lead students to realize the

little amount of power they have to challenge these conventions. Given this situation, it makes sense for students to try to imitate and appropriate standard ways of writing rather than risk alienating themselves by subverting them.

In addition to questioning conventions, ELI 83 teachers can point out the potential benefits of writing according to conventions. In particular, when readers have certain expectations about texts, following conventions can help fulfill readers' expectations and aid their comprehension of the text. ELI 83 teachers can help students understand how each academic community has its own assumptions about the ways knowledge is constructed and expressed through writing. The academic community's assumptions and expectations are continually reproduced and reshaped through writing, and the concept of intertextuality helps explain how writers base their work on what has come before. As Bazerman (2004) explains,

Texts do not appear in isolation, but in relation to other texts. We write in response to prior writing, and as writers we use the resources provided by prior writers. When we read we use knowledge and experience from texts we have read before to make sense of the new text Our reading and writing are in dialogue with each other as we write in direct and indirect response to what we have read before, and we read in relation to the ideas we have articulated in our own writing. (p. 53)

As new graduate students begin to see how the texts of their fields inform and respond to one another, they can notice how conventions play a role in shaping the conversation. Moreover, they may experiment with these conventions and practice drawing on their readings in their writing. Since effective participation in an academic community is largely dependent on a facility with the modes of communication that sustain that community, the ELI 83 curriculum can help students develop this facility by showing how their academic reading and writing inform each other.

Rather than promote any single position towards writing conventions, ELI 83 teachers may engage these issues in meaningful ways. By addressing the power and conflict inherent in

academic discourse, ELI 83 teachers can avoid imposing this discourse upon their students. At the same time, they can recognize the power that discourse conventions carry and help students access this power by making them aware of how conventions are used in scholarly writing. In class, examples of academic writing from various fields may be analyzed to reveal the conventions the authors follow. These conventions may be examined for their purpose and effect; they can also be questioned and problematized (e.g., Skarin, to appear). Teachers can encourage students to evaluate the writing conventions of their fields and form their own positions, considering how, when, and whether to follow them in their own writing. They could also examine the work of writers who take alternative approaches and weigh the effects of doing so in their own work.

ELI 83 teachers may raise these issues and questions, and also acknowledge and appreciate the resources and experiences that ELI 83 students already have to draw upon in their identity negotiation in this new context. It is my hope that such an approach will help students claim agency in their writing and engage with discourse conventions as active subjects.

Engaging Students' Knowledge and Identities

In addition to helping students investigate and critique the discourse conventions of their fields, ELI 83 classes may have the important goal of engaging students' knowledge and identities. As multilingual graduate students, ELI 83 students often have had significant and varied experiences in academic, work, and community settings in the U.S. and abroad. ELI 83 teachers can draw on students' knowledge in the classroom and help students make connections between their past and present situations and the multiple literacies they are familiar with.

One way of working toward this goal is to have students compose their literacy autobiographies. A literacy autobiography is “an account of significant factors and events that have contributed to your development as a reader or writer” (Connor, 1999, p. 41, as cited in Cho, 2005). Matsuda (2002) points out that literacy autobiography assignments can help teachers understand students’ backgrounds and identify their literacy needs. Writing a literacy autobiography requires students to consider the experiences that have led to their perspectives on reading and writing in their L1 and L2. It also asks students to explain how they see themselves as writers, readers, and students, including their concerns, challenges, and strategies for responding to these.

Cho (2005) used such an assignment in her L2 Academic Literacies course at the University of Hawai`i. Her assignment (Cho, 2005) asks students to describe the different discourse communities they participate in, and to compare and contrast their literacy practices in different contexts. Assignment questions also address students’ identity negotiation in light of English academic discourse: “To what degree can you see yourself bringing your informal voice into academic genre? Do you see any conflicts between your academic identity and other aspects of your identity? Do you see ways in which your past personal identity interacts with the academic aspect of your identity in the present? If so, how?” (Cho, 2005, p. 1). To help students prepare to write their literacy autobiographies, teachers could introduce the notions of discourse communities, literacies, and identity, perhaps providing examples from memoirs of multilingual writers (e.g., González, 1998 and Shen, 1989) to illustrate the questions and challenges that arise in the process of acquiring academic discourse. A project such as this could help ELI 83 students analyze the situations they encounter as multilingual graduate students in their departments. It could also help them recognize the value of their many literacies, and see English academic discourse (and the discourses of their fields) as existing among the many

discourses they have encountered. In addition, the literacy autobiography could prepare students to think about the ways that discourse, identity, and literacy interact, and continue to draw on this knowledge as they research the discourse conventions of their fields.

Engaging the Three Levels of Composing

McComiskey (2000) defines three levels of composing: textual, rhetorical, and discursive. The ELI 83 course description (above) identifies these three levels as areas that are developed through the course. McComiskey (2000) explains,

At the textual level, we focus our attention on the linguistic characteristics of writing. At the rhetorical level, we focus on the generative and restrictive exigencies (audience, purpose, etc.) of communicative situations. And at the discursive level of composing, we focus our attention on the institutional (economic, political, social, and cultural) forces that condition our very identities as writers. (pp. 6-7)

McComiskey (2000) argues for writing pedagogy that integrates and makes explicit all three levels of composing. These three levels are addressed through the CAP, although the different levels may or may not be made explicit to students. The CAP leads students through the process of analyzing writing for their fields at the textual level by asking them to notice the documentation format and linguistic features (e.g., use of active/passive voice, verb tense, sentence structure) of journal articles and model papers that students select from their fields. At the rhetorical level, students analyze these same texts, reporting on the genre, audience, and organization, as well as the writer's role, purpose, and the ways the writer tries to achieve his/her purpose through rhetorical moves. The CAP also asks students to notice authors' claims to authority, that is, "how the authors attempt to establish credibility" in their writing (Talmy & Faucette, 2003, p. 6). The CAP emphasizes analysis at the rhetorical and textual levels, and ELI

83 teachers may further support the discursive level by engaging students in critical analyses of texts and academic discourse throughout the project.

In my experience teaching ELI 83, I realized that it was necessary to raise students' awareness of how writing exists at multiple levels, and how texts are not solely conduits of information, but socially and rhetorically situated documents. Before I could ask students to complete their CAP assignments, I needed to scaffold the knowledge and skills needed to examine a text through textual, rhetorical, and discursive lenses. ELI 83 instructors are not solely language teachers, nor just writing teachers, but teachers of rhetoric, genre analysis, and the social-political significance of texts. When I first began teaching ELI 83, I was not fully prepared for this role, but I soon discovered my own need to see and present texts from multiple perspectives in order to help my students understand and fulfill the goals of the CAP. Before students can be expected to complete the CAP assignments, they need to be familiar with the vocabulary and epistemology of rhetoric and composition (e.g., What is a genre? What are writing conventions? How to identify a writer's intended audience?), and they need practice applying this knowledge to their analysis of various texts. Likewise, in order to meet the goals of the CAP and the ELI 83 curriculum, teachers need to be familiar with ways of helping students grasp and apply these concepts.

To analyze texts and writing conventions at the discursive level, in addition to the textual and rhetorical levels that the CAP supports, teachers can show how texts exist for various discursive purposes and initiate discussion around questions such as these:

- What are writing conventions?
- What social, political, cultural, or economic functions do writing conventions serve?

- How could writing conventions be helpful to you as a writer? How could they be harmful?
- How can you tell which conventions a writer follows in his/her text, and which ones s/he may be resisting?
- What are the possible effects/results of following writing conventions? What are the possible effects/results of writing in alternative ways?

These questions are meant to help students engage critically with the discourse conventions of their fields and to take advantage of the ELI 83 classroom as a relatively ‘safe’ space for grappling with, resisting, and/or following these conventions in their own work.

By making students’ multiple literacies and discourses the object of investigation, ELI 83 teachers may make students’ experiences and concerns central in the classroom. This approach seeks to engage the processes that students go through as they encounter and figure out the discourses of their fields. In this way, students may research writing conventions critically and consider how these conventions affect their work and lives as students. It is important for ELI 83 students to be familiar with the discourse conventions of their fields, but the investigation should not stop there; it may also support students’ ideological becoming by considering how each student negotiates and/or resists authoritative discourses, and for what purposes. As Valdés (2004) writes,

in order for students to eventually engage as writers in what Guerra (1997, p. 252) calls “the arduous act of struggling with a clash of voices,” the classroom must be opened to multiple texts and multiple voices. Students must be encouraged to see themselves as having something to say, as taking part in a dialogue with their teachers, with students in their classroom, with students in their school, with members of their communities, and with other writers who have written about issues and questions that intrigue them. (p. 88)

By engaging in these kinds of dialogue, ELI 83 teachers may support students as they acquire English academic discourses on their own terms.

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