In at the Deep End: The Struggles of First-Year Hungarian University Students Adapting to the Requirements of Written Academic Discourse in an EFL Context

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Abstract This paper describes the principal findings of an ethnographic study of 20 first-year bachelor's students of English at a large Hungarian state university. The research was done over three semesters, and the main aim was to construct a grounded theory explaining how new students become enculturated into written academic discourse in an EFL context. Another point of interest was to investigate the role played in this process by a compulsory academic skills course. The research framework drew on contrasting theoretical constructs of learning: the first was Swales' (Other floors, other voices: A textography of a small university building. Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 1998) description of the academic discourse community (ADC) and the other was Lave and Wenger's (Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 1991) model of learning through peripheral participation in communities of practice. The theoretical model that was the outcome of the research describes the students' experience in their first year in three phases. The main features of each phase will be described, and the usefulness of the model for understanding the broad differences between students will be discussed.

Keywords Academic writing · Academic discourse community · Writing course · EFL

1 Introduction

As an experienced teacher of academic writing to undergraduates, the differences in how students tackle their writing assignments and in the quality of the writing they produce have long been of interest to me. Alongside this interest, I have noticed that many of my colleagues in the School of English and American Studies (SEAS) in the large Hungarian university where I teach have shown an increasing pessimism

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about the standard of students' writing, believing that it is dropping noticeably and that student writing has become a problem that is difficult to deal with.

Such a discourse of student writing being seen as a problem at university is by no means restricted to Hungary or other countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Recent official government-sponsored reports in the US and the UK have described student writing in almost exactly the same way as some of the teachers in the research that forms the subject of this paper. For example, the following comments are from a focus group of teachers reported on in the Nuffield Review Preliminary Report, which was an independent study done in 2006 in 21 higher education institutions across England and Wales:

> Basic writing skills are lacking. (admissions office)
> They can't even write in sentences. Their spelling is appalling. They can't be understood. (physics)
> They don't know how to write essays—they just assemble bits from the Internet.
> Elementary maths is missing. They can't put decent sentences together. There is no provision in university for people who can't write essays. (biology)
> They can't structure a set of ideas in a logical sequence. (physics)
> They can't write in sentences—they produce meaningless work. (mathematics)
> They graduate with a 2:1 but they still can't spell or write English! (physics). (Wilde et al. 2006, p. 14)

For comparison, here are some extracts from interviews done with teachers of English literature and English linguistics in my own PhD research in 2006, which is the subject of this article (the code indicates the type of teacher—LIT is literature and LING is linguistics—their identifying number, and the page of the transcript):

> … very often they don't write a thesis, there is no thesis, so I'm reading but I've no idea toward what thought I'm reaching or, where I'm going, or what is the point. (LIT2, p. 9)

> The other problem, however, is that they have no real understanding of the basics of writing a proper essay—structure, style, register. (LIT3, p. 1)

> But you having to check on Google whether it's original or plagiarised every time is a very distressing thing. (LIT5, p. 3)

> Well somehow the level is worse and worse, it is deteriorating. (LING3, p. 3)

Clearly there is a widespread crisis in confidence concerning student writing skills in higher education. These kinds of crises in literacy are nothing new—perhaps the earliest documented one can be found in the works of Cicero lamenting the standard of Latin usage of his day—and there have been several in the era of mass education. Perhaps the greater numbers of students gaining access to higher education in developed countries can be part of the explanation (Grabe and Kaplan 1996; Lillis 2001; Hyland 2011), but whatever the cause or exact nature of the phenomenon, classroom teachers are faced with the very real problem of how to help students who have weak literacy skills.

Moreover, this problem cannot be divorced from the problem of the difficulty students often experience in making the transition from high school to university, which has been pointed out in both first-language contexts (e.g., Kruse 2003) and

especially in situations where students with a different mother tongue are faced with English as the medium of instruction (Hyland 2002a, 2011; Paltridge 2004; Zhu 2004). It was specifically to deal with this difficult transition to higher education that freshman composition courses were created in the US education system during the onset of mass education at the end of the nineteenth century, and these courses were to evolve into the teaching of English for academic purposes (EAP) courses that are now widespread in institutions around the world catering to both English as a second language (ESL) students in English-speaking countries and English as a foreign language (EFL) students in their own countries.

As a teacher in one such EAP course in an EFL context, I had a strong pedagogical interest in finding out more about my own students' difficulties when they first came to university and were faced with challenging writing tasks in their specialist subjects. This interest became the focus for my PhD research. The main aims were to find out how new students adapt to the requirements of academic writing and how effective the compulsory Academic Skills Course (ASC) that they took in the first two semesters was in helping them adapt. Since this involved a long-term, in-depth study, I chose to use a qualitative ethnographic approach. The details of this approach and the main findings of the research will be described in the paper, but first the theoretical framework of the research will be described.

2 Theoretical Background: Taking a Social View of Learning

The view of high-level writing as an activity that is situated in different communities, which is the basis for this research, emerged in the years around the end of the 1970s in the US as a reaction to the existing view of writing as a purely cognitive process. In particular, the Flower and Hayes model (1977, 1980, 1981), which attempted to show how the rhetorical choices of good writers differed from bad ones during the writing process, was highly influential. Their cognitive process model was an attempt to show what writers were actually doing during the writing process, but, although it was based on research in cognitive psychology, by seeing writing purely in terms of interacting sets of cognitive processes, the individual writer actually became nothing more than the site of these processes. In effect writers became ciphers, and the influence of the social worlds in which they were situated was restricted to the limits of the writing task itself: "all of those things outside the writer's skin, starting with the rhetorical problem or assignment and eventually including the growing text itself" (Flower and Hayes 1981, p. 369). There is no sense here of the writer as a social agent engaged in an activity taking place in a particular social context.

Dissatisfaction with the view of writing as a purely internal cognitive process was answered by an interest in understanding the social context of writing. Several US researchers began to examine the social contexts of literacy and look at writing in relation to various communities. Brice-Heath (1982, 1983) studied small-town literacy practices at home and in school, Graves (1983) studied writing in elementary

schools using a participatory ethnographic approach, Bazerman (1981) examined three scholarly texts from traditional academic fields to see how the expectations of the different communities in which they were written affected the knowledge presentation techniques in the papers, and Bartholomae (1983) analyzed the writing assignments of university undergraduates in several different subjects.

But it was Patricia Bizzell who first used the term *discourse community* in an article published in 1982 describing how the theoretical views of writing composition teachers affect the classroom teaching of students. Bizzell stated that academic writing also needed to be seen as an outer-directed activity influenced by the social context rather than the exclusively inner-directed view of Flower and Hayes. According to Bizzell, teachers therefore have the responsibility to explain to their students "that their writing takes place in a community, and to explain what the community's conventions are" (p. 230). She also asserted that teachers could only gain a full understanding of their students' problems by taking account of the way the social context influences their writing. That way we can hope to discover why writers make the decisions they do, rather than merely describing how the writing process works.

It is this outer-directed view of writing occurring within a discourse community that defines how problems and solutions are understood that was the initial basis for the present research study. Using this approach, language use is seen as being conditioned by its social context, and "educational problems associated with language use should be understood as difficulties with joining an unfamiliar discourse community" (p. 227). However, although Bizzell identified some of the key features of a discourse community (DC) in her article—it has shared discourse conventions, such as habits of language use, expectations, ways of understanding experience, and patterns of interaction, and we move from our native DC in which we were born into other DCs in the wider society—she did not offer an explicit definition of exactly what constitutes a DC.

It was only when the linguist and teacher John Swales wanted to employ the concept in his research on the use and teaching of English in academic settings at the tertiary level that a clearer definition of a DC was attempted. In particular, Swales was interested in the way each DC produced distinctive written genres. Explaining that he "wish[ed] to explore and in turn appropriate" the term (Swales 1990, p. 21), Swales offered a definition which focused on six defining characteristics:

> 1. *A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.* […]
> 2. *A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.* […]
> 3. *A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback*. […]
> 4. *A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims*. […]
> 5. *In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis*. […]
> 6. *A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise*. (Swales 1990, pp. 24–27, author's italics)

It is important to understand that while Swales' definition is extremely useful as a means of more clearly identifying the nature of different DCs and in particular the academic discourse community (ADC), it does not give much insight into the notions of privilege and access (privilege in terms of the power given to members and access in terms of the relative ease or difficulty with which non-members can enter a DC) since this was not what he was interested in. Indeed in a very short time other researchers were calling for a more nuanced view of ADCs. Cooper (1989) pointed out that Swales' definition was only satisfactory from an institutional viewpoint (which, of course, is exactly where it came from) and called it an abstraction used as "a way of labelling individuals as insiders or outsiders, as people who either have the requisite values, knowledge, and skills to belong, or lack these necessary qualifications" (Cooper 1989, p. 204).

Cooper (1989), along with Bartholomae (1985) and Bizzell (1986), was also concerned with how individuals become initiated into DCs and eventually become accepted members. Subsequent situated research on the enculturation of undergraduate and graduate students in a wide range of subjects and contexts has shown that ADCs are indeed highly heterogeneous spaces with conflicting and competing requirements, and each individual ADC is itself the subject of change and contest over meaning. Students need to cope with these multiple discourses and practices in order to negotiate their own identity and manage the difficulties of competing requirements (Herrington 1985, 1988, 1992; Chiseri-Strater 1991; Prior 1991, 1995, 1998; Chin 1994; Ivanic 1998; Hyland 2000; Dysthe 2002). Such a realization, of course, has profound implications for the way writing is taught at university.

Swales himself later acknowledged the complexity of ADCs by offering a revised view of how DCs can be defined in a closely observed qualitative study of three ADCs on three floors of his own building in the university where he worked (Swales 1998). He distinguishes locally situated place DCs from focus DCs in an attempt to more accurately reflect a complex reality. One of the most important aspects of Swales' study, apart from demonstrating that ADCs are not stable, easily defined entities but are constantly shifting sites of socially constructed and disputed meaning, is that it shows the need to closely examine the interplay of ADCs in a particular institution over time in order to understand what is happening. This applies equally well when the research aim is to understand what happens to new students when they are required to adopt the academic writing conventions of one or several ADCs, as in the present study.

Swales' (1998) study is interesting for another reason: His rethinking of the notion of the DC was clearly influenced by another social constructivist view of learning, namely, Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of learning taking place through participation in communities of practice. This view of learning placed heavy emphasis on its quintessentially social character: "We mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practises of a community" (p. 29). Lave and Wenger were chiefly concerned with ideas of apprenticeship and how novice learners become masters through "legitimate peripheral participation" (p. 29) in the practices of the

community and with the existing members of it, peripheral participation meaning the stage when the apprentice is just beginning to learn through small tasks that constitute only a small part of the skill set of a full member of the community.

Similarly to Bizzell (1982), Lave and Wenger (1991) have been criticized for not giving a precise definition of what a community of practice is. Their original definition is somewhat amorphous but clearly has a lot in common with Bizzell's view of learning in communities, and both show a concern with access to knowledge and the power it provides:

> A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e., for legitimate peripheral participation). (p. 98)

There are clear differences between the two views, however. Whereas Bizzell's and Swales's concept of the DC is largely descriptive, Lave and Wenger attempt to explain how learning actually takes place and how an apprentice becomes a full member. By including the ideas of legitimacy and peripherality in their model, they are also able to examine the power roles involved in the process of learning and "the problem of access" for newcomers (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 100). They also put great emphasis on the importance of identity and how it develops through participation: "identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another" (p. 53). This focus on the role of identity in learning corresponds with much subsequent research on the importance of identity and power relations in academic writing in higher education (Clark and Ivanic 1997; Ivanic 1998; Tang and John 1999; Hyland 2000, 2002a, b; Lea 2004; Fairclough 2010) and underlines the potential use of Lave and Wenger's framework as an analytical tool for understanding learning in these contexts.

In my PhD study, these twin theoretical constructs of DCs and situated learning in communities of practice were employed to approach and interpret the research problem. The idea of new students at the university entering a series of overlapping ADCs was the conceptual starting point that framed the research at the beginning. Once the cyclical process of data gathering and analysis had begun, Lave and Wenger's model of learning was used as a conceptual lens with which to examine the emerging categories in order to assist the understanding of the learning process taking place within this particular setting.

This use of Lave and Wenger's ideas to explore learning at university level is not original to this study. In their original monograph, Lave and Wenger (1991) deliberately chose not to discuss any form of organized schooling in order to avoid conflict with existing claims about formal education: "We wanted to develop a view of learning that would stand on its own, reserving the analysis of schooling and other specific educational forms for the future" (p. 40). Neither of them have so far done this, but others have applied their ideas to various formal learning situations. At the

level of higher education, Flowerdew (2000) incorporated elements of both Swales' DC and the notion of legitimate peripheral participation to interpret the difficulties of a non-native-English-speaking doctoral graduate struggling to have an article published in an international journal. Knights (2005) studied the formation of learner identity through the practices of a particular university subject (English) at two key points in its historical development, using a social constructivist viewpoint that included communities of practice to frame his analysis. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) used communities of practice theory to explore how adult students made the transition to higher education through a program designed for that purpose.

Perhaps the closest piece of research to the present study that incorporates Wave and Lenger's ideas is Carter et al.'s (2007) interview study of US undergraduates writing in a particular discipline. By interviewing 10 students at the end of a one-semester biology course about their experiences and attitudes related to the writing of lab reports for the course, the researchers were able to show how learning to write according to discipline-specific genre requirements can facilitate socialization into the discipline. Though the aim and context was different from this study, the view of writing according to genre requirements as a means of socialization into academic disciplines and the theoretical framing of the research bear strong similarities.

Having discussed the theoretical background of the study, I will now briefly describe how the research was designed before giving an account of the main findings.

3 Research Design: Building a Grounded Theory

Because the aim of the research was to examine a complex process taking place over the course of a whole academic year (beginning in September 2005), I designed a research plan involving a longitudinal ethnographic study using standard qualitative data-collection techniques. The principal research questions were to find out how new students become enculturated into academic writing requirements at the university in the SEAS and what part the compulsory ASC plays in the process. To understand the process of enculturation and be able to answer these questions, the specific qualitative approach chosen was the construction of a grounded theory based on the data. Grounded theory research was developed in 1965 by Glaser and Strauss as a way of using a qualitative approach for theory construction based on rigorous data analysis techniques. The approach aims to construct a theoretical model that describes the phenomenon based on the actual data collected (what Glaser and Strauss [1967] referred to as a substantive theory), principally through the means of in-depth interviews.

The actual research design involved a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews done with 20 volunteer students from four different ASC classes over the course of their first three semesters. The interviews took place in six rounds and they become progressively longer as trust and rapport was developed with the interviewer

and as categories began to develop. The first round of interviews took around 15 min, but in the final round some of the interviews lasted well over an hour. Each round focused on different points, but there were some general points that were common to all the interviews, such as how they were coping at the moment with their studies. The interview schedules were developed using the method described by McCracken (1988) in his famous monograph on the long qualitative interview. Three of the four ASC teachers were also interviewed, as were 10 teachers of the students' main subjects, literature and linguistics (five teachers from each). All the interviews were transcribed from digital recordings and sent to the interviewees for checking.

In addition to interviews, participant classroom observations using a simple observation protocol based on Creswell (1994) were done in the four ASC classes over the entire first semester, and course materials were gathered from the ASC and from the students' courses in literature and linguistics. With the agreement of the students, samples of their main written assignments were also gathered and used as a basis for more focused discussion in the interviews. Whenever possible the marked essays of the students were gathered or the original essay was given by the student. The kind of feedback given on these essays was of particular interest.

The data analysis of the transcribed interviews, which formed the principal body of data on which the study was based, was based on the constant comparative method first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The basic principle involves initially breaking up the data into separate pieces, each coded for the idea they contain, and then progressively reassembling the pieces to build an abstract representation of the phenomenon under investigation. At the same time that the initial open coding takes place, the researcher engages in memo writing to facilitate her or his thinking about the emerging concepts in the data. As these concepts emerge and connections are made with previously coded data, larger categories are constructed and their properties are filled out in the form of related sub-categories that emerge from the continuing analysis of more and more data. Further memo writing then aids the researcher's thinking on how the categories relate to each other. Through cyclical rounds of coding and memo writing followed by further data collection to provide further information about major categories, a point is reached where the categories are fully understood and no new information can be added. This point is known as saturation. In the final stages, advanced memos can be integrated to provide the basis for the theoretical model which describes the phenomenon.

In the present study a particular approach to grounded study known as constructivist grounded theory was followed, as outlined in the work of Kathy Charmaz (1995, 2000, 2006), herself a doctoral student of both Glaser and Strauss. The reason for this is that the present study takes the postulates of constructivism, essentially that knowledge is constructed rather than separate from the knower, as the underlying research paradigm since this allows a more nuanced approach to understanding the research setting and its members while at the same time adhering to rigorous and systematic research techniques. For a detailed account of the more flexible constructivist version of grounded theory and how it relates to the components of classic grounded theory, Charmaz (2006) should be consulted.

In the following section, the main elements of the theoretical model that was the outcome of the research will be described. However, owing to space limitations, only a general overview will be possible, and the less important categories will not be dealt with. In addition, only a few representative data extracts will be presented to illustrate some of the key findings, and these will mostly be taken from the student interviews, which formed the main data source.

4 Results and Discussion: A Three-Phase View of Student Enculturation into Written Academic Discourse

The aim of constructivist grounded theory is to develop a theoretical model that enables a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, in this case, student enculturation into the requirements of written academic discourse, based on an analysis of the data co-constructed by the participants and the researcher. The resultant theory is an interpretation raised to the level of abstract concepts that attempts to understand how the participants' experiences are embedded in a broader social context. This interpretation is itself a reflection of the conditions under which it was produced, and therefore it is very much context dependent. Its value lies, however, in offering a conceptual understanding of a substantive social process that can lead to new insights and knowledge transformation. It has the potential to stimulate new thinking about the situation it describes, and there is a possibility of transferring the theory's concepts to similar situations in other settings and perhaps giving new directions for further research.

The model that was the outcome of this study has three distinct phases, but it should not be understood as a straightforward chronological representation of the new students' experience since in each individual case the phases may have greater or lesser duration and they are likely to overlap. The first phase covers the first entry of the students into the university and the beginning of their studies, the second phase describes how they deal with their first writing assignments, and the final stage looks at the process of identity formation and the point the students have reached by the end of their first year.

5 Phase One: Experiencing a Culture Shock

When students first start their university careers, they are faced with a series of challenges, both inside and outside the classroom. In effect, students undergo a culture shock when beginning their studies due to the major differences between the school system and studying at a university. The following quote clearly illustrates this sudden difference (the coding of the quotes indicates the pseudonym given to the student, the number of the interview, and the page of the transcript):

> The beginning was a bit chaotic I think. We just had to find our place. It's really completely different from secondary school. First of all we just go into the class, they tell us everything—what to do, where to go, but here we have to organise everything for ourselves and there is really nobody who can tell us what to do. (Sarah, Int.1, p. 2)

Students need to become acculturated to a new way of doing things and take much more responsibility for their own studies. For some students this process can take much longer than for others, and if they are still struggling to get organized when they are faced with major writing assignments this can put them at a significant disadvantage. Leaving work to the last minute and failing to meet deadlines seems to be a kind of avoidance strategy in the case of challenging assignments and tends to result in lower quality work. Personality traits seem to be an important factor here, but students from more academic backgrounds seem to be better equipped to take control of their own learning. Raising awareness of this problem and giving students organizational strategies to deal with it may be helpful, as suggested in the literature on strategy training for language learners (e.g., Oxford 1990; Wenden 1991).

A key characteristic of classical culture shock situations is the experiencing of anxiety and stress. In the case of beginning students, anxiety is most often felt when comparing their language ability to the ability of those around them in their new classes, having come from an environment where they were used to be being one of the best students: "But it's new for me that although I was the best in my class in grammar school, I'm among the worst in the new class, and it's hard to manage with this thought" (Natalie, Int. 1, p. 2). This feeling of not being good enough is manifested in spoken ability first when compared with the more proficient students, but it also includes the student's ability in writing when they have to write their first tasks. Though weak students are aware at the beginning of their weaknesses, it can come as a shock when they are presented with clear evidence of them on their first marked pieces of writing:

> It's hard for me because I love English very much and I thought that I'm good in it. But when we got the homeworks [sic] and essays I saw that I have a lot of problems, a lot of mistakes /?/ and I think that it's not good. And if we learn something but we realise that it's not our cup of tea we have to change. And I'm hesitating. (Estella, Int. 1, p. 2)

How quickly students are able to overcome this language anxiety largely depends on how confident they feel in their language ability. Indeed, the most critical factor determining how well students adapt to the new academic requirements of university when they first begin their studies in SEAS is their previous English-learning experience. For the majority of students, this means their school experience; unfortunately, for many of them this was not positive (out of 17 students who attended regular secondary grammar schools or secondary vocational schools, only three gave their English classes or English teachers a positive evaluation). As a result, there is wide variation between students in terms of both their language accuracy and their writing experience. Many of them have a poor grasp of grammar and little writing experience. The experience of Richard was typical:

> So at my English classes at secondary school we had only these basic things. So I know what's a verb and what's a noun but I don't really know, they didn't really teach us the rules. Or maybe they tried to teach us but, well it depends on the teacher too. So if he can keep up the interest and the attention, in that case he's good, but this teacher couldn't really handle this problem so… (Richard, Int. 6, p. 10)

However, for those students who attended bilingual schools with immersion programs (there were four, one of whom attended both regular and bilingual schools at different times), the story was very different. The students regarded their school experience generally very positively and had received much more writing experience. In one case the student had received intensive training in argumentative essay writing at her school:

> We always had a topic and then for two or three months we had argumentative essays for one of the topics. And then we read a lot of argumentative essays, so written by other persons, and then just look through them and try to find out if it's good or not good. And then just correct them and then we had to write our own ones. Also every week one. (Sarah, Int. 1, p. 2)

Unfortunately, only a small percentage of students have the chance to study foreign languages in immersion programs in Hungary, and there is a long history of problems in attracting and retaining skilled English teachers in schools (Elekes et al. 1998; Nikolov 1999; Vágó 2000; Lukács 2002; Ministry of Education and Culture, Hungary 2008). Of course, the highly variable experience and language proficiency of the students has important implications for the ASC, the purpose of which is to prepare the students to meet the academic requirements of university, particularly in writing.

6 Phase Two: Learning to Write about Subject Content

The second phase describes what happened when the students were faced with their first major writing assignments in their main subject courses in literature and linguistics. In their first year they had a mixture of obligatory and elective seminar courses and lectures that they took in these subjects. In the seminar courses it was often the case, though by no means always so, that they had to write a home essay as one of the major outcomes of the course, and it was when students were faced with a long home paper task (typically five to six double-spaced pages, or around 1500 words) that they first had to learn and observe formal academic writing requirements and the particular conventions for writing about content in that subject. For this reason, learning to write about subject content is at the center of the theoretical model.

For the majority of the students, writing their first home paper was a stressful experience, especially for those who had little or no previous essay-writing experience. Csenge, who had only written short free compositions at school, found the prospect of writing her linguistics home paper daunting:

> I know that I have to read a lot of books and look at the Internet and so on, but I think it will be a very hard work for me. I would like to do it during the autumn break but I have no idea how to start it, and, I don't know. I think it will be a very hard task. (Csenge, Int.1, pp. 4–5)

The linguistics home papers in particular were challenging due to their strict and detailed formatting requirements and the problem-solving nature of their content requiring the students to use several sources.

However, it was the challenge given by home papers that also made them effective "drivers" of learning. The students needed several sets of skills, such as research skills, note-taking skills, and the ability to organize ideas logically in writing, as well as basic language accuracy, awareness of formal style, and the ability to understand and follow a set of formal requirements for academic papers. It seemed that the main benefit of writing these papers for novice students was the acquisition of these sets of skills rather than providing sophisticated analysis of content ideas. Several of the subject teachers were aware of this:

> I think that they shouldn't write because linguistics teachers like to read linguistics essays, or essays on linguistics written by first-year students, because I don't think they could tell us new things. […] I think the main target of having them write these essays is that they can learn how to write an essay on linguistics, and it's not about content. (LING3, p. 1)

As a result of the difficulties posed by these papers, students developed a number of coping strategies. These included planning ahead, discussing assignments with other students, working in a team during library research, reading other students' essays, and asking a teacher for help. The cooperative nature of several of these strategies, such as forming a research team or reading other students' essays, could lessen the burden of the task and help students who were unsure how to proceed. Other studies have shown that collaborative social activity in communities of practice can promote learning. Hall (2003), for example, describes a web-based learning project used to create a learning network in a group of higher education institutions in the UK. In this study, these learning networks seemed to be formed informally by students engaged in challenging assignments.

It was noticeable that subject teachers tended to be suspicious of such student cooperation, fearing that students would hand in essays written by others. In several cases this was given as one of the reasons for not setting written assignments, as in the following quote:

> Another reason, and this is true of the second term and the third term as well, is the sadly developing practice amongst students to take essays from the Internet, have students write essays for them for money, or for other kind of compensation, to hand in essays once handed in to another teacher by someone else, or definitely sort of taping together an essay from the various secondary sources. (LIT1, p. 2)

However, the present research indicates that cooperative learning seems to promote discourse socialization through discussion and shared understandings. It also helped reassure anxious students that they could handle difficult tasks and gave them increased confidence when doing subsequent tasks.

The avoidance of giving students serious writing tasks—the alternatives mentioned and experienced by the students were in-class tests involving short answers

and occasionally timed short-essay questions—represented perhaps the biggest factor that could interfere with students' development in mastering discourse conventions. For those students who completed both their first semesters (one student failed to write any home papers and dropped out after her first semester, and another student did not complete the second semester), the number of home papers written varied from two to six, but only one student wrote less than three papers. However, with the beginning of the new three-year BA in 2006, the Linguistics Department decided not to set any home papers for undergraduates anymore. Since the majority of seminar papers were linguistics papers, this means that there has been a marked decrease in the number of home papers written by first-year students since the research was done. The alternative of in-class writing is not a substitute for a home essay, as both teachers and students seemed to be aware of: "when I spoke to my teacher, _____, she said that she believes that kind of writing has nothing to do with academic writing. The literature, whatever, this literature in-class test. That was her opinion of it" (Emily, Int. 4, p. 1).

The most common reason given by teachers for avoiding the setting of home papers in seminars was fear of plagiarism, as indicated in the words of Literature Teacher 1 on the previous page. There is wide coverage of this topic, not to mention frequent high-profile cases of academic plagiarism involving politicians and academics (there is even a website set up by activists devoted to finding cases of high-level academic plagiarism in Germany, the GuttenPlag Wiki). Obviously, plagiarism has become a major concern with the widespread use of the Internet. However, rather than just regarding student plagiarism as academic cheating, a more nuanced approach seeks to understand the reasons for plagiarism and thus to find ways of more effectively educating students about it. For instance, Abasi et al. (2006) did interview studies exploring plagiarism in the work of five graduates and seeing it as an issue of awareness of available identity options in academic writing. Woods (2004) suggests that having a better understanding of students' attitudes to the use of the Internet could lead to a more effective discussion of plagiarism and academic honesty and mentions a number of practical steps that can be taken.

In the current study, while nearly all the subject teachers mentioned being worried about plagiarism, only one of them, a linguistics teacher, actually took practical measures to prevent students handing in old essays and several of the teachers seemed unaware of techniques to avoid plagiarism, such as the setting of clearly specified tasks and not repeating tasks. The Linguistics Department did set a very specific home paper task for their first paper, but it was the same task for all the first-year students, so several of the teachers were worried that the students would copy each other's work. Many of the teachers mentioned fear of plagiarism as the main reason for not setting home papers and they sometimes communicated that to the students as well:

> In literature we'll have to write an in-class essay because our teacher told us that there are many students who download the essay on the Internet. And she's just fed up with it. And that's why we have to write an in-class essay. (Jane, Int.1, 3)

Other teachers, while still giving home papers, attached reduced significance to them by merely using them as an extra factor that could raise or reduce the students' final grade. In such cases there tended to be very little feedback given on the paper and sometimes no mark was given, just a positive or a negative sign. In almost all cases only one draft was required.

It is perhaps worth noting that the only clear-cut case of Internet plagiarism in this study happened in the first semester for a literature paper that had very few guidelines and the writing of which was not monitored closely by the teacher. Working closely with students on their writing is one way recommended in the research literature to help students understand and avoid plagiarism (e.g., Li and Casanave 2012), but several of the subject teachers stated that they did not think it was their job to teach students to write. A couple of the teachers pointed towards another consideration, increased workload, that might play an unspoken role in the reluctance to have students write long essays: "teachers are very reluctant to make them write essays because it just adds to the immense amount of workload" (LING2, p. 1). "Some of them will not ask them to write papers because they are tired of correcting all these awful papers, but that's not the way, cos who will teach them? They will never learn that" (LIT2, p. 10). It is undoubtedly true that having students write proper essays, using sources to support a line of argument, cannot be done effectively without considerable work from the teacher. Both these teachers, interestingly, had decided that such work was worthwhile and did give their students home essays.

The other major influence on the students' writing development in their first year was what they learned in the ASC over their first two semesters. In terms of developing the general skills necessary for academic writing, the students were very positive about the usefulness of the course. In some cases where students felt they had particular weaknesses in writing, they felt that they had made substantial improvements because of the help they had received in the course, as in the case of Julie, who found writing in an appropriate style difficult:

> … both Tamás and I had a problem that we wrote almost personal stuff, instead of impersonal stuff, and Teacher D told us not to get rid of this, but we could write a formal essay and informal essay as well. And that was very fine because we could use our imagination in one side, and, and we could take away easier because we had that option too. So we didn't have to get rid of it. And I think it's a very good method and it helped a lot, so. (Julie, Int. 3, p. 2)

In particular, the ASC put an emphasis on developing writing skills through formative feedback and doing multiple drafts of assignments. In their main subject courses it was rare for students to write more than one draft of a paper and the summative feedback they got on the paper was often minimal or even non-existent (sometimes they were just told the grade at the end of the course and never got their paper back). It was also the case that only the best students tended to receive more detailed oral feedback on their work, focusing mainly on content. It was only in the ASC that all students had the opportunity to get regular practice and receive detailed feedback on their writing, and this helped them to identify their weak points and begin to address them. The rich feedback especially was something that many of the

students felt had helped them improve their writing. Speaking at the end of her first year, Fiona was one such student:

> It's definitely got better, definitely. Because I have to write so much that I just get used to it. For Academic Skills I had to write tons to hand in and things like that. But, I mean if, if, I would say that what my problem is with writing, it's, I would say, is still spelling probably, and punctuation. But it's not, it's, so it's gotten much better. (Fiona, Int. 5, p. 8)

However, while the students felt the ASC was effective in helping them with general writing skills, there were mixed views of how useful it was in helping them write their home papers. Students with little or no previous essay writing experience did feel that the ASC had enabled them to understand what an academic essay actually was:

> So I learned how to write an argumentative essay, because I didn't even know what an argumentative essay is. And for me it was strange because essay sounds so serious. So I never written an essay before. An essay's such a big thing, so I was kind of confused at the beginning but, but now I think it, it is easier for me. So I've practised it. (Steven, Int. 3, p. 1)

But beyond general writing skills, such as paragraph organization and basic argumentative development, many of the students felt that the ASC could not help with difficult papers, particularly those they had to write for linguistics, because the type of task and the content were so different. Perhaps Sarah expressed this most clearly:

> The hard thing with it was that we couldn't really use what we learned in the Academic Skills because it's an absolutely different thing. So maybe just, we just think about it how to structure it, that we include an introduction and at the end some kind of conclusion or summary. But it was an absolutely different type of task. So we just could take these questions we got and try to figure out the answers and search in the library and then, somehow make an order and [pause] to organize the paragraphs but it was absolutely different. (Sarah, Int.3, pp. 1–2)

The students also found the formal requirements for using academic sources in their writing very challenging to master, and, since library research and the APA system of referencing were only taught in the second semester of the ASC, by which time all the students had been required to write at least one home paper, it was of little help to them in this respect as well. It may even have resulted in confusion for some students, who had already had to use other referencing styles in the first semester. However, they were given much more help with this aspect of academic writing in the ASC than in their subject seminars and those students who asked their ASC teacher for help with citing and referencing in the first semester did receive assistance.

The question of exactly what the role of an EAP course intended to help students master academic discourse requirements should be has long been the subject of debate. Johns (1995), for instance, recommends the teaching of authentic disciplinary genres in EAP courses as a way to familiarize undergraduates with disciplinary conventions. Leki and Carson (1997), in a research context quite similar to the present one, claim that students need to be taught "text-responsible writing" (p. 41), by which they mean the ability to show understanding of a source text. What seems

clear from this study is that without close cooperation with teachers from other disciplines, an EAP course will only be of limited use to students when learning the text-responsible and genre-specific aspects of their disciplinary writing in other subjects. In the ASC, the genre-specific conventions that were taught were those of applied linguistics, because the course was taught by teachers in that department. No serious attempt was made to look at the writing conventions and genres of any other discipline.

7 Phase Three: Building a New Identity

By the end of their first year, most of the students had achieved a kind of new equilibrium within the university. This equilibrium was the identity that they had begun to construct within their new academic discourse communities (ADCs) through the peripheral participation described by Lave and Wenger (1991). Each student had to a greater or lesser degree become socialized into the disciplinary discourse conventions of several ADCs through the writing they had done, and for the more able and successful students this had enabled them to move further into one or more ADCs. The less successful students, on the other hand, remained on the periphery of discourse communities, having made only very limited progress in adapting to their discourse requirements. There were three students who decided they did not belong in any ADC in the faculty. Two of them opted to study for a different degree at the same university (History and Free Arts), and the other left after one semester to do a vocational course at another institution. This was because they could not understand or were not interested in the disciplinary ways of constructing knowledge they were required to engage in, or because their level of language proficiency simply made it too difficult for them to legitimately participate in knowledge construction within the chosen ADCs, or a combination of both reasons.

The situation of the remaining students at the end of their first year can be represented by a series of concentric circles (see Fig. 1 below), with the innermost circle representing the full members of an ADC, that is, the students' teachers. The students can be put into three categories depending on the extent of their socialization into the ADC. Those who are struggling and remain on the periphery, I term survivors. They have managed to get through the year but have experienced considerable difficulties. Their struggles are related to their writing but not exclusively so—they have also had serious problems understanding the content of some of their courses. Three of the students clearly belonged to this category, and they were probably the kind of student some of the subject teachers were referring to when they bemoaned the poor standard of first-year writing:

> I feel devastated more often than not by the level of standards and the level of the essays, because, especially, not just literature wise, but the language is very difficult. Right now I gave back an essay with the note 'Language, or grammar, renders it almost impossible to read, or to follow', because I spend much more time on correcting mistakes than following the train of thought that I am supposed to assess in the paper, so it's very bad. (LIT2, p. 1)

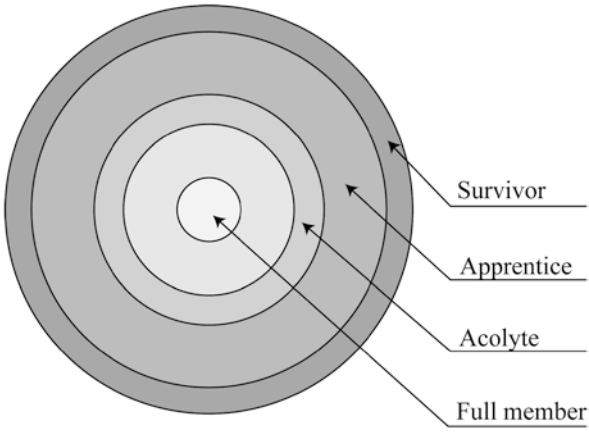

Fig. 1 Membership categories of university ADCs

It is likely that such students will remain on the periphery throughout their university career, sometimes failing courses and at other times just scraping through, unless they can improve their language abilities. Because there is no ASC after the first year, they have to take much more responsibility for their own learning in order to address their weaknesses. In his third semester, one of these students, Richard, was trying to teach himself the grammar that he felt he had not been taught at school, working alongside his flatmate after his regular courses: "So basically after university we go home, after classes and we learn hugely. So that's our afternoon program!" (Richard, Int. 6, p. 6). Such efforts, if continued, are likely to result in improvements in writing and perhaps also in understanding disciplinary content but require sustained motivation and independent learning skills. Another student took a different strategy by looking for courses that were easier to pass: "I made a little search on the Internet about them, on the school home page, and then I tried to catch the better teachers" (Natalie, Int. 6, p. 2). It seems she was satisfied if she could do well enough to pass: She was content to be a survivor.

Most of the students, although experiencing some difficulties in their courses, had experienced more success in adapting to the discourse requirements of the ADC and understanding the ways of organizing disciplinary knowledge in writing. These students I term apprentices, and the majority of the 20 students in the study belonged here, although the boundaries were not always clear cut, with several of the weaker students being quite close to the survivors. Apprentices are still near the periphery of the ADC but they have made discernible progress, and some of them may have done very well indeed, like Fiona. She had learned how to organize her studies effectively: "I definitely feel like I've got a routine now. I know how to do things so that they work out" (Fiona, Int. 6, p. 4). As a writer she felt she had developed through reading and writing a lot:

> Well last term I really felt that, because I had to write like three home essays because one for Poetry, one for Novel and one for Syntax, and then actually, well for Syntax it's not that difficult actually but it's gotten better because I had to write two already and I know where to look for stuff and I know how to put them in. So that's gotten, because I've written two already in Linguistics, it's gotten better. (Fiona, Int. 6, p. 4)

Fiona is a good example of a student who had become an accomplished writer through practice, becoming much more confident in all aspects of academic writing, including the formal requirements of the disciplines she wrote in.

The main difference between the most able apprentices and the third category of student, the acolytes, was that apprentices had no intention of becoming full members of a discourse community, whereas acolytes had a conscious desire to move much deeper into their chosen ADCs. This is of course a very small group, and in this study there were only two such students. Both of these students came from academic families and were highly motivated. One of them knew as soon as she began her studies that she wanted to do a PhD and the other was clearly so interested in her studies that it appeared inevitable that she would continue them (in fact, both of them went on to complete their PhDs and become academics themselves). While these two students were still a long way from being full members of an ADC at the end of their first year,[1] they had produced some excellent written work and as a result had formed much closer relationships with some of their teachers than most of the other students. It is inevitable that such gifted students will be noticed and will be given special status by the full members of an ADC. It could be said that for acolytes progress is centripetal, whereas as the position of survivors is more centrifugal. Paradoxically, although acolytes need little extra help to make progress, they tend to receive more attention than the students who are actually struggling the most to get a foothold in an ADC.

8 Conclusions and Implications

Although it has only been possible to give an overview of the findings of the study in this paper, the main components of the theoretical model that was its outcome have been described. Since the model is grounded in data from a particular place and time, there are of course limitations on its application to other, possibly very different, contexts. However, it has been a powerful tool in helping me to understand more clearly what the successful enculturation of novice students into academic written discourse in my own context involved. It also provides a way of seeing the struggles of weaker students to master academic writing not simply as a problem, but more in terms of what needs to be done to make it easier for them to grasp disciplinary conventions and ways of writing about specialist knowledge while at the same time trying to improve their language proficiency. Unfortunately, in the real world there are time and resource constraints that make this difficult to achieve, but one outcome of the research has been to make me a more effective EAP teacher.

It has also enabled me to see the limitations of a short ASC in helping students learn to write in specialist disciplines, especially in situations where there is little

[1] This is indicated by the fourth circle in Fig. 1, which is unlabelled. This represents the experience and further study necessary to become a full member of the ADC.

dialogue between different ADCs and virtually no cooperation between EAP teachers and disciplinary teachers. This points to the way such a model, or at least aspects of it, may be transferrable to other contexts where conditions are similar, particularly in institutions in other post-communist European countries where education is under pressure both financially and from the point of view of prestige. Although it may appear that the research the model is grounded in is now out of date, and certainly many changes have occurred in the institution where the research was done, some of the insights given by the research into the nature of student writing development and the difficult transition from school to university may also be of relevance in many other contexts.

Perhaps the most important insight given by the research is the major role of challenging writing tasks in promoting student enculturation into disciplinary writing practices. For those students with sufficient language proficiency, it was through engaging with long researched essay tasks that they grew in competence and confidence. As a corollary of this, one of the most important pedagogical implications of the research concerns the status of writing in higher education. In this particular institution it is the case that since the study was done, significantly less high level writing has been required of the students in the three-year BA system that has replaced the longer MA system. The obvious result of this is that new students have considerably less opportunity to learn disciplinary requirements and develop general writing skills.

There is evidence that this downgrading of expectations and reluctance to give students meaningful writing tasks may be part of a wider trend that has seen the devaluation and marketization of undergraduate education, what Hayes and Wynward (2002) refer to as "the McDonaldization of higher education." Such devaluation and loss of prestige has wide-ranging effects not just for students but for all members of the academic community. As far as writing in higher education goes, the status of the essay has been in question for some time (see, for example, Womack 1993), but as long as we continue to require students to write theses and dissertations as the main means of achieving their degree, members of the academy are obliged to assist students in mastering the conventions of disciplinary writing.

Another practical implication of the research related to this obligation is the need for better awareness of the nature and reasons for Internet plagiarism and the practical techniques that can be taken to avoid it. Rather than merely issuing institutional sanctions, a wider dialogue needs to take place so that all parties are well informed and there is a discourse of understanding rather than one of fear. Avoiding writing because of the danger of plagiarism is not a solution and will not be of any use for those students who most need help and practice for their writing development.

Finally, I hope that one other outcome of this research is that other EAP practitioners may be encouraged to do similar outer-directed studies of their own students' writing development and so add to the existing knowledge of how students can most easily adapt to the requirements of their new disciplines when they enter the academy.

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