

Language Issues in English-medium Universities: A Global Concern
University of Hong Kong, China
18-20 June 2008

A new categorisation of university student writing tasks

Sheena Gardner and Hilary Nesi

s.f.gardner@bham.ac.uk h.nesi@coventry.ac.uk

The British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus is a collection of 2761 good quality student assignments, produced in a wide range of disciplines and across four levels of study, from first year undergraduate to taught masters level. It was developed under the direction of Nesi, Gardner, Thompson and Wickens as part of a project based at the universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford-Brookes and funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council (RES 000-23-0800) to investigate genres of university student writing. The initial phase of the investigation was to explore departmental and disciplinary environments through interviews with students and academic staff (Nesi and Gardner 2006; Gardner and Powell 2006). Contextual information was also gathered concerning each student writer who contributed to the corpus.

One main aim, however, has been to identify broad genre families within the corpus: groups of genres that may be employed across a range of disciplines and levels of study, and which may be known by a variety of names, yet which share key structural components and a common social/ pedagogical purpose. The 'essay' is perhaps the most obvious of these genre families, but we have identified a number of others of equal relevance to student writers, including the Case Study, the Critique, the Design Specification, the Narrative, the Research Report, the Problem Question and the Proposal.

In this paper we introduce our classification system, and describe genres within each of the thirteen genre families we have identified, such as site reports (engineering) as a type of Case Study, and marketing plans (business) as a type of Proposal. Our classification of genre families will help subject lecturers and writing tutors communicate assignment requirements more clearly to their students, and it will also help raise awareness of the wide variety of genres university students are now asked to write. Additionally the classification system provides a useful tool for reconsidering the nature of assessment in English medium education, particularly in terms of educational policy objectives.

Outline of Presentation

1. Earlier Classifications of Student Writing

Theoretical; Surveys; Studies of Written Tasks Set / Writing Prompts

2. Earlier Classifications of Educational Genres

Primary School Project in 1980s; Secondary School Learner Pathways in 1990s

3. A Classification of Genre Families for the BAWE Corpus

Disciplinary Context, The Corpus, The Classification of Genre Families
Genre Families and Discipline, Level, Pathway, Register

4. Implications for English Medium Education Internationally

BAWE Corpus Holdings

<i>Assignments</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Arts & Humanities</i>					
Applied Linguistics (115), English (106), Philosophy (106), History (96), Classics (82), Archaeology (76), Comparative American Studies (74), Other (50)	239	228	160	78	705
<i>Social Sciences</i>					
Business (146), Law (134), Sociology (110), Politics (110), Economics (96), Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism, Management (93), Anthropology (49), Publishing (30), Other (9)	207	197	162	202	777
<i>Life Sciences</i>					
Biological Sciences (169), Agriculture (134), Food Sciences (124), Psychology (95), Health and Social Care (81), Medical Science (80)	180	193	113	197	683
<i>Physical Sciences</i>					
Engineering (238), Chemistry (89), Computer Science (87), Physics (68), Mathematics (33), Meteorology (29), Cybernetics & Electronics (28), Planning (14), Architecture (9), Other (1)	181	149	156	110	596
Total	807	767	591	587	2761

		1	2	3	4	Total
Arts & Humanities	students	101	83	61	23	268
	assignments	239	228	160	78	705
	texts	254	232	160	82	728
	words	468,353	583,617	427,942	234,206	1,714,118
Life Sciences	students	74	71	42	46	233
	assignments	180	193	113	197	683
	texts	186	203	92	246	727
	words	299,370	408,070	263,668	441,283	1,412,391
Physical Sciences	students	73	60	56	36	225
	assignments	181	149	156	110	596
	texts	201	156	159	121	637
	words	300,989	314,331	426,431	339,605	1,381,356
Social Sciences	students	85	88	75	62	313
	assignments	207	197	162	202	777
	texts	215	205	165	210	804
	words	371,473	475,668	440,674	688,921	1,999,130
Total	students	333	302	234	167	1039
	assignments	807	767	591	6587	2761
	texts	856	796	576	659	2896
	words	1,440,185	1,781,686	1,558,715	1,704,015	6,506,995

(In Social Sciences 3 students and 9 texts are of unknown level)

Genre families identified in the corpus

Case Study: A description of a particular case with recommendations or suggestions for future action, written to gain an understanding of professional practice (e.g. in business, medicine, or engineering).

Critique: A text including a descriptive account, explanation, and evaluation, often involving tests, written to demonstrate understanding of the object of study and to demonstrate the ability to evaluate and / or assess the significance of the object of study.

Design Specification: A text typically including an expression of purpose, an account of component selection, and a proposal; and possibly including an account of the development and testing of the design.

Empathy writing: A letter, newspaper article or similar non-academic genre, written to demonstrate understanding and appreciation of the relevance of academic ideas by translating them into a non-academic register, for a non-specialist readership.

Essay: A discussion, exposition, factorial, challenge, commentary or comparison, written to develop the ability to construct a coherent argument and develop critical thinking skills.

Exercise: Data analysis or a series of responses to questions, written to provide practice in key skills and to consolidate knowledge of key concepts.

Explanation: A descriptive account and explanation, written to demonstrate understanding of the object of study and the ability to describe and/or assess how it functions.

Literature Survey: A summary including varying degrees of critical evaluation, written to demonstrate familiarity with the literature relevant to the focus of study.

Methodology Recount: A description of procedures undertaken by the writer, possibly including Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion sections, written to develop familiarity with disciplinary procedures and methods, and additionally to record experimental findings.

Narrative Recount: A fictional or factual recount of events, written to develop awareness of motives and/or the behaviour of organisations or individuals (including oneself).

Problem question: A text presenting relevant arguments or possible solution(s) to a problem, written to practise the application of specific methods in response to simulated professional scenarios.

Proposal: A text including an expression of purpose, a detailed plan, and persuasive argumentation, written to demonstrate the ability to make a case for future action.

Research Report: A text typically including a Literature Review, Methods, Findings, and Discussion, or several 'chapters' relating to the same theme, written to demonstrate the ability to undertake a complete piece of research, including research design, and to appreciate its significance in the field.

Selected References

- Alsop, S. and H. Nesi (under review) Issues in the development of the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus. Submitted to *Corpora*
- Askehave, I and J. Swales 2001. Genre identification and communicative purpose: A problem and possible solution. *Applied Linguistics*, 22, 2:195-212.
- Biber, D., S. Conrad, R. Reppen, P. Byrd, and M. Helt (2002). Speaking and writing in the university: a multidimensional comparison. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36, 9-48.
- Brain, G. 2001. When professors don't cooperate: a critical perspective on EAP research. *English for Specific Purposes* 20, 3:293-303.
- Bridgeman, B and S. Carlson. 1984. Survey of academic writing tasks. *Written Communication* 1,2:247-280.
- Canesco, G and P Byrd. 1989. Writing requirements in graduate courses in business administration. *TESOL Quarterly* 23: 305-316.
- Coffin, Caroline. 2004. Learning to write History: The role of causality. *Written Communication* 21, 261-289.
- Drury, H and C Webb 1991 Literacy at tertiary level: making explicit the writing requirements of a new culture. In F. Christie (ed) *Literacy in Social Processes: papers from the Inaugural Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics Conference*. Deakin University, 1990.
- Ganobcsik-Williams, L. 2004. A report on the teaching of academic writing in UK Higher Education. London: Royal Literary Fund.
- Gardner, S. (forthcoming) "Integrating ethnographic, multidimensional, corpus linguistic and systemic functional approaches to genre description". *Proceedings of the 19th European Systemic Functional Linguistics Conference*, Saarbrücken, July 2007.
- Gardner, S. and J. Holmes. (Forthcoming) "From section headings to assignment macrostructure in undergraduate student writing" In E. Swain (ed.) *Thresholds and Potentialities of Systemic Functional Linguistic*. Trieste: Edizioni Universitarie Trieste.
- Hale, G. C. Taylor, B. Bridgeman, J. Carson, B. Kroll, R. Kantor. 1996. *A study of writing tasks assigned in academic degree programs*. Research Report 54. Princeton, NJ.
- Holmes, J. (under review) Verbal and cognitive processes in academic disciplines. In: M. Charles, S. Hunston, D. Pecorari (eds) *At the Interface of Corpus and Discourse: Analysing Academic Discourses*. London: Continuum.
- Horowitz, D. 1986. What professors actually require of students: Academic tasks for the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly* 20: 445-462
- Macken-Horarik, M. 1996. Literacy and learning across the curriculum: towards a model of register for secondary school teachers. In R. Hasan and G. Williams (eds) *Literacy in Society*. Applied Linguistics and Language Study Series. Longman. Pp. 232-278.
- Johns, A. (ed) 2002 *Genre in the Classroom: Multiple Perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. (chapters by Bhatia, Macken-Horarik, Martin,)
- Martin, J.R. 1989. *Factual Writing: Exploring and Challenging Social Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, J.R. 1997. Analysing genre: functional parameters. 3-39. In Christie, F. and Martin, J.R. (eds) *Genres and Institutions: Social Processes in the Workplace and School*. Open Linguistics Series. London: Continuum.
- Moore, T. and J. Morton. 2005. Dimensions of difference; a comparison of university writing and IELTS writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 4,1:43-66.
- Nesi, H. and S. Gardner (2006) "Variation in Disciplinary Culture: University Tutors' Views on Assessed Writing Tasks". In: Kiely, R., Rea-Dickins, P., Woodfield, H and G. Clibbon (eds) *Language, Culture and Identity in Applied Linguistics (British Studies in Applied Linguistics, Volume 21)* pp. 99-117. London: Equinox Publishing.
- Nesi, H, Sharpling, G. and Ganobcsik-Williams, L (2004) The design, development and purpose of a corpus of British student writing. *Computers and Composition* 21/4, 439-450
- Rosenfeld, M., R. Courtney and M Fowles. 2004. *Identifying the Writing Tasks Important for Academic Success at the Undergraduate and Graduate Levels*. GRE Board Research Report No. 00-04 R. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Swales, J.M. 2004. *Research Genres: Explorations and Applications*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wickens, P. (2007) Author stance in theme position: disciplinary variation in a corpus of assessed UG student writing. Paper presented at the BAAL Conference, Edinburgh.