

UC MEXUS FACULTY GRANT

Students need language support to write for academic publications

Developing support for students learning to write academic papers in English—the *lingua franca* of most of the academic world—has become essential in almost every nation. Thus, my specialty in academic writing in English has enabled me to work with colleagues from several countries in their quest to provide students and researchers with the linguistic skills for participating in the global knowledge economy.

I am currently working to establish such a support program with the school of languages faculty at Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP). The goal is to enable both undergraduate and graduate students to produce quality academic work and to be credentialed as English instructors in upper secondary and higher education. My colleagues are hoping that our UC MEXUS-supported project¹ would provide a good start for instilling effective English skills not only within BUAP, but also on other Mexican campuses.

The challenges such programs must address extend beyond the more traditional concerns of language instruction: grammar, syntax and vocabulary. This is not to downplay the basic language problem. It takes years to become sufficiently proficient in a foreign language. It takes time to become habituated with the basic skills required to pull familiar words out of sound streams, parse at sight complex constructions so you know who is hitting whom, on whose behalf, and why; spontaneously recognize verb tenses and forms, make sense of idioms, and recognize distinctions among related words. Combined with the ability to reproduce all these constructions and meanings, is the confidence to interact fluently without being frozen by embarrassment and anxiety.

Nonetheless, communicating within academia intro-



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duces an additional subset of skills—not so much the bigger words or more complex sentences, but the understanding and language use that is tied to particular meanings, cultures, institutions and situations.

When I interact with scholars from different countries, I often face just such issues: To fully understand my colleagues' perspectives, I must familiarize myself with their scholarly domain, university and government policies, and program documents. I also must interact with administrators, not all of whom speak English.

These challenges may be mitigated somewhat in some sciences, where there is an international lexicon and much of the reasoning is expressed through mathematics. On the other hand, more

advanced material in many scientific and technical fields is primarily in English, so students must master disciplinary concepts while they are working with a language that is not their own and in which they are unaccustomed to thinking.

The humanities and social sciences, however, offer a different challenge since nuances of phrasing are of the utmost importance. One needs a heightened understanding of both culture and language because knowledge lies in cultural matters that may vary tremendously even in basic concepts. In our native language, we formulate concepts using the network of distinctions and meanings that our language offers and that match our entire cognitive development. When I studied sociology as an undergraduate, we talked about the organization of towns. But our concept of a town was a small U.S. town, not a *pueblo*. We compared them to rural family farms, not to *latifundia* or

¹ Charles Bazerman, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, UC Santa Barbara. *Scientific publication in English for Spanish-speaking graduate students.*

haciendas. This demonstrates how closely tied sets of meaning and reasoning in any field are to the language we first learned them in.

Specific assumptions also accompany the organizational patterns of particular educational systems. The fact that I took an undergraduate sociology course—and tasted a number of majors in the sciences, social sciences and humanities before entering English studies—is a peculiarity of the American higher education system. U.S. students often have two years of general education and can switch majors even up to the point of graduation. This means that there is often more tolerance of interdisciplinary reasoning in undergraduate papers and less expectation of disciplinary intensity than in systems where students enter the university with a predetermined specialization. Such diverse university cultures not only determine the kind, number and nature of written assignments but also how students learn to think and how they learn to write academically. Often the methods by which students are evaluated also differ. All these factors affect how researchers approach written material and the kind of scholarly work appearing within their nation's journals.

Disciplinary cultures also vary—both in how the universe of knowledge is divided into disciplines and in how each discipline proceeds in carrying out its business. In U.S. higher education; my own area, the teaching of writing, has historically been associated with literary studies. In other societies, however, first language writing tends

not to be taught in higher education, and second language writing becomes the domain of applied linguistics.

Further, although literary culture is shared and discussed internationally, the approach to each country's literary culture, linguistics and scholarly practice differs greatly. Even the expectations for articles and their organization may vary, so that essays may appear to be of a distinctly different genre. An essay that meaningfully and persuasively speaks to pressing disciplinary questions in one country will not necessarily do so in another, nor will its arguments and evidence necessarily be persuasive. UC MEXUS and similar international academic cooperation programs provide wonderful opportunities to expand our visions and gain from our differing perspectives and knowledge. The support needed by students and scholars for whom English is a second language is crucial not only to provide for writing academic English, but also to learn how to argue and reason within distinctly different academic cultures so that all may bring their voices to the international marketplace of ideas.

This work requires a high degree of individual consultation and mentoring by people who are knowledgeable about the academic cultures for which students are writing as well as the cultures they are writing in. We hope that our first steps in designing such programs will lead to models that fit within the context of Mexican universities and education, while producing students who are academically bicultural.



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He specializes in the teaching of writing, writing in the disciplines, the rhetoric of science and technology, the history of literacy, genre theory, activity theory and distance learning.

In July, Bazerman published *The Handbook of Research on Writing: History, Society, School, Individual, Text* (Routledge, 2007). This book brings together the broad-ranging, interdisciplinary, multidimensional strands of writing research, reflecting a wide scope of international research activity.

Chapter authors come from such disciplines as anthropology, archeology, typography, communication studies, linguistics, journalism, sociology, rhetoric, composition, law, medicine, education, history and literacy studies. The thirty-seven chapters are organized into five sections: history of writing, writing in society, writing in schooling, writing and the individual, and writing as text.

Information on the book is available at: <http://www.taylorandfrancis.com>. Bazerman can be reached at bazerman@education.ucsb.edu.