Chapter 2.01.18

Improving Students’ Academic Writing: The Results of Two Empirical Projects

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In this paper, we report the results of two projects (FWF projects P14720-G03 and L179-G03) which were conducted during the last years at the Linguistics department of Vienna University and which aimed (a) at establishing an empirical basis for the development of writing courses for humanities students and (b) at developing and testing a prototype of such a course in a blended learning framework.

In the first study (Gruber et al., 2006), Austrian university students’ writing practices in three social science disciplines (social history, business studies, business psychology) were investigated. Following a multidisciplinary approach, the study combined textual analyses with interview analyses and participant observation of three courses. In the theoretical framework which combined Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1992) with the academic literacies approach (Jones, Turner, & Street, 1999), a text production model was developed which differentiates between ‘text types’ (abstract units on a rather general level) which are mainly influenced by the social and institutional purposes they serve and ‘genres’ which are (semiotically enriched) realizations of text types in certain institutional and social contexts. Text types and genres are related to field-specific habitus of persons insofar as the knowledge which text types and genres are appropriate for which kind of task in a field are relevant symbolic capitals. One general goal of the project was to investigate if students already develop a discipline-specific habitus and hence if they produce texts which realize discipline-specific genres. A further major goal was to investigate if and which linguistic features of a seminar paper correlate with the grade it receives.

Quantitative and qualitative text analyses of all linguistic characteristics (generic and rhetorical structures, meta-communication, intertextuality, argumentation,
modality, lexis) which were analysed showed that students in the three seminars produced different genres which, however, belonged to one abstract text type which was coined ‘academic qualification text’. This text type is located at the intersection of two social fields, namely the field of academia and the field of the university respectively (Bourdieu, 1992).

The results of the interview analyses showed that students are aware of this doubled institutional purpose of the text type in differing, yet systematically varying ways. Whereas social history students mainly oriented towards the academic purpose of a seminar paper and thus display the habitus of ‘apprentice scholars’, management students and most of the business psychology students orient towards the assessment character of the texts they produce and thus display a ‘student habitus’.

The relationship between linguistic features of the texts and the grades the papers received was not straightforward. Most linguistic features of the micro-textual level do not show any correlation with the grades the papers received. Many features of the meso- and macro-textual level, however, do show rather systematic correlations with grades.

In the second project (Gruber, Huemer, & Rheindorf, 2009), an academic writing course for (advanced) students which was based on the results of the previous project was developed in a blended learning framework (Apel & Kraft, 2003). The course design comprised the development of (a) a web-based entrance module which consists of a self assessment of students’ writing skills, and an investigation of the extent of their demand of assistance; (b) a general (discipline-independent) module containing information on academic writing; (c) two discipline-specific modules offering information on and training in academic writing (developed for Linguistics and Social and Economic History students). The entrance module consists of a series of questions and tasks that students have to complete and is designed to detect the individual students’ level of previous writing experience and knowledge. This module was implemented on Vienna University’s learning platform. The results of the entrance module were used to decide whether individual students were advised to work through one (or several) chapters of the general module before attending the writing course, or if they could attend the writing course without additional pre-course instruction. For the purpose of developing didactic applications of the linguistic results of the previous projects, the linguistic concepts and categories (see above) were ‘translated’ into ‘everyday concepts’ of scholarly work with which students were expected to be familiar. The general module covers seven broad areas which are relevant for a functional understanding of the specifics of academic language and academic genres in the humanities and social sciences: ‘What is science?’; ‘Scholarly work’; ‘Academic language’; ‘Differences between everyday language and academic language’; ‘Structuring a paper’; ‘Perspective’; ‘Describing, Explaining, and Argumentation’. The module was designed as a hypertext and is available online at http://www.univie.ac.at/linguistics/schreibprojekt/Grundlagen. The two discipline specific courses elaborate the language-related aspects of the general module and comprise the following broad areas: ‘Structuring a paper’, ‘Perspective’, ‘Explanation and argumentation’ and ‘The thematic thread’. Their development followed a blended learning approach, which integrates face-to-face