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Confronting MA students' and seminar teachers' diverse agendas concerning academic literacy development through an EAP writing course

ABSTRACT
Academic courses aim to develop kinds of literacy that are significantly different from what students know from other contexts. Mastering ways of constructing knowledge in scholarly disciplines in a foreign language poses a considerable challenge, not only for the uninitiated. The challenge is none the less small for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing instructors as the currently observed diversity of student populations in master's programs compels them to revise some of their long-standing assumptions and practices. The article reports on a study aiming to compare MA seminar teachers' and beginner MA students' perceptions of writing needs and an EAP course expectations and suggests how the responses can be used constructively in writing pedagogy.
Keywords: EAP, academic writing courses, academic literacy, MA level writing needs, student and teacher expectations

1. Introduction

Today's academia is a place of diversity. While a decade or so ago candidates for philological studies displayed comparable readiness and capability for academic study and it was relatively easy to expect a certain English Philology student profile, today with the recruitment process no longer relying on entrance examinations or interviews with candidates, such expectations are hardly realistic. To illustrate, daily observation of and communication with the students and tutors of the MA program of English Studies at a large Polish university points to the following areas of diversity:
  – general proficiency in English,
  – cultural and linguistic background,
  – time available for study due to half- or full-time employment,
  – past educational histories,

– expectations concerning instruction, tutor supervision and own involvement,
– awareness of own academic goals and interests,
– self-direction skills,
– type and strength of motivation,
– amount of general background knowledge related to English Studies (i.e. literature and linguistics),
– academic literacies already or simultaneously acquired in a native or foreign language other than English,
– other types of literacies acquired (e.g., digital)

The consequence of this diversity is that it is increasingly difficult for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers to envisage what tasks and materials will be relevant and useful for the current populations of students. Increasingly, instructors have to opt for a compromise, which leaves more competent students dissatisfied and bored and still poses a challenge for the weaker ones. In academic writing courses these discrepancies are especially pronounced and aggravated by the fact that instructional groups consist of students from different specializations, who, in addition to general academic competence, are expected to develop literacy in a specific discipline.

Also, with a growing number of students undertaking other language studies in parallel with English studies, there are more and more multilingual students. As suggested by Pomerantz and Kearney (2012), these students have at their disposal access to multiple ways of modelling what is *good* writing; in other words, writing experiences and proficiency across more than two languages shape their perceptions of themselves as writers and their writing habits (p. 222). For the above reasons, the challenge for an EAP teacher is in the need to cater simultaneously for very diverse needs.

2. Importance and nature of writing in academia

Undeniably, writing is a key skill for those intending to successfully participate in the exchange of expertise with the view to building and verifying knowledge in the academy. Students who are less experienced members of the academic discourse community, or as Ivanić (1998, p. 297) refers to them "apprentices on the margins of community membership", need to master and demonstrate their command of the rules of academic writing because in this way they can show their understanding of disciplinary concepts and give structure to their thoughts on a given academic subject matter, which can be subsequently subjected to evaluation by more expert academics.

Writing is not merely the process of producing a text, but an action performed in response to a communicative motive that is an integral part of the rhetorical situation in which writing occurs. The rhetorical situation comprises the writer, the purpose of writing, the context, the audience or the readers to whom the written text is directed, etc. This multi-dimensional nature of academic prose is reflected

in global moves and local operations performed in texts (Wolsey, 2010, as cit. in Wolsey, Lapp, & Fischer, 2012, p. 715).

The global moves include engaging with disciplinary content, summarizing others' contributions, anticipating reactions, and situating one's point of view within the work of others. They are difficult to teach and learn because they require understanding of abstract notions, for example which ideas to attribute or how to relate evidence to claims. Especially problematic and not really expected of most students is a move that involves construction of one's identity as a knowledgeable participant with a unique voice and capable of making original and worthwhile contributions, not only synthesizing or replicating the expertise of other writers. Even if they are not capable of producing more advanced global moves in their writing, students need to engage with them to understand complex networks of meaning in academic prose.

The local moves, on the other hand, consist of the knowledge of linguistic conventions at the word and sentence level (e.g., discipline-specific terms, choice of pronouns, use of the passive, complex noun phrases and syntactic structures). According to Wolsey (2010), excessive attention to local moves can be counterproductive to students' understanding of global ones. The development of academic writing skills, including increasing students' control over both types of moves is the focus of writing instruction under the aegis of English for Academic Purposes.

3. The role of EAP writing instruction
The idea of EAP courses is that they play a supportive role to MA seminars and assist in preparing students for MA thesis writing. As Hyland (2018, p. 385) notes, in the subject literature EAP university courses are sometimes described in a critical or dismissive way. In addition to accusations of them weakening local academic discourses (Swales, 1997) and putting L2 writers in a passive position of subordination and conformity by imposing Anglo-American norms and values (Pennycook, 2001), EAP courses are regarded, especially if run by disciplinary non-specialists, as ineffective in teaching disciplinary conventions (Spack, 1988). As such they were reduced to a merely supportive or "'remedial service activity' on the periphery of university life" (Spack, 1988, as cit. in Hyland, 2018, p. 383). EAP teachers' role, in turn, is seen as that of 'linguistic service technicians' tasked with repairing the broken language of students in order for them to be 'successfully' processed by the institution" (Hadley, 2015, as cit. in Hyland, 2018, p. 389). The object of EAP writing instruction can be suspect to students themselves who were found to consider academic writing a skill they needed to learn to receive their degrees, but not needed in their future careers (Johanson, 2001, p. 31).

Seen in this light, academic writing courses may seem as purely instrumental, hermetic, subservient, and of little relevance to life outside the academy. Despite these reservations, EAP is an important aspect of university education (and an

area of intense research) as it introduces student writers to a type of literacy that is an intrinsic part of academic culture by bridging the gap between a more personal proficiency-oriented type of writing and serious and complex research-based writing (cf. Hyland, 2018).

4. The study

Despite reservations about EAP invoked in earlier sections of this paper, and out of the belief that EAP instruction may be relevant and useful provided academic writing teachers and seminar teachers delineate areas of responsibility and cooperation, a small-scale study was undertaken to explore a range of issues pertaining to writing instruction focus, some of which go beyond the scope of this article, including MA program entrants' conceptions of academic writing or MA seminar teachers' strategies for dealing with the growing diversity of students in terms modifications of expectations, course content or teaching techniques.

4.1 Rationale

To ensure that writing instruction within EAP is relevant and useful for its recipients, it is necessary to find out about their points of departure. As suggested above, these cannot be taken for granted anymore because of the currently adopted recruitment system at Polish universities. Also, according to the subject literature, investigating students' and teachers' expectations and needs is a worthwhile pursuit. Angélil-Carter (2000), among others, stresses that writing instructors' knowledge of the types of literacy experiences their students engaged in prior to their academic work is essential for the development of competence in academic writing. Finding out about students' needs and expectations, and particularly any discrepancies between students' and teachers' perceptions of their respective roles and responsibilities can assist in working out an appropriate approach to students' writing processes and outcomes (Wolsey et al. 2012, p. 714).

4.2 Aims

The focus of the study as reported in the present article is limited to selected aspects of the larger issue of needs, roles and expectations of those involved in development of academic literacy. Specifically the investigation set out to answer the following research questions:

1) What are students' perceptions of their own academic writing skills on entering MA level studies?
2) What are MA seminar teachers' entry expectations of 1st year students' academic writing skills?
3) What are the respective expectations of the students and MA seminar teachers towards academic writing (EAP) instructors with regard to the focus of the academic writing course?

4.3 Context and participants
- 70 students of 1st year MA studies in the Institute of English Studies at a Polish university, enrolled in seminars in linguistics, applied linguistics, British/American literature studies, and translation studies. All the students are obliged to attend a two-semester, 60-hour course in academic writing, for which they are divided in instructional groups of about 20 people each. The groups are mixed with regard to specialization types, with representatives of two or three specializations per group.
- 10 experienced academic teachers conducting seminars in the above disciplines.

4.4 Research instruments and procedure
The following instruments were used to collect the data:
- a 12-item questionnaire with open-ended questions for students. The questionnaire covered the following topics: academic interests, motivation to study at MA level, experience in academic reading, writing, and research, conception of academic writing, perceptions of own writing deficits, expectations towards MA thesis writing supervision, understandings of own role in the process of MA thesis writing, and expectations towards the academic writing course.
- an 8-item questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions for seminar teachers. The topics included teachers' perceptions of 1st year MA students, strategies of accommodating diversity in classes, expectations about entry academic competences of MA studies entrants, perceptions of students' writing problems, and expectations towards the academic writing course.

The questionnaires were administered at the beginning of the academic year 2018/2019 and their completion took approximately 30 minutes. The questionnaires were filled in anonymously to keep the respondents' identities confidential. Because the majority of the data were of a qualitative kind, the responses provided to specific questions were analyzed for recurring themes and grouped around general categories that emerged in the process of analysis. The preliminary categorization was reviewed and adjusted in the light of the second and third re-reading of the data. To compare the teachers' and students' responses concerning the issues that this study set out to investigate, thematically corresponding items from the teachers' and the students' questionnaires were subjected to analysis.

4.5 Results
The first research question concerned students' perceptions of their own academic writing skills at the beginning of their MA level studies in terms of the problems they have. The chart below shows the distribution of the responses to Question 5

in the student questionnaire (i.e., SQ5: What are your greatest problems in writing academic texts?) within the identified categories in percentages.
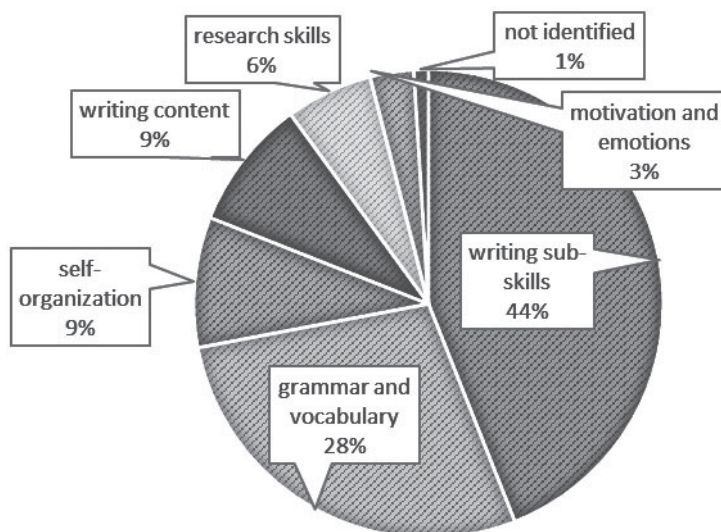

Figure 1. Students' perceptions of their writing skills

The above figure suggests some variability of the responses but it is noticeable that a large number of students see their major problems predominantly in the areas of a) various writing subskills[1] (e.g., *writing a thesis statement, ordering information, adding or leaving out unnecessary things, creating a text as a whole – not separate paragraphs,* etc., and b) (academic) language deficits (e.g., *exaggerated use of metaphorical expressions, structure of longer sentences, writing in a too complex/too simplistic way, problems with articles and commas, using incorrect grammar,* etc.) Incidentally, this correlates with the students' notion of academic prose in general, which, as transpires from their answers to another questionnaire item (i.e., SQ6: What is your definition of academic writing?), a third of the respondents (33%) tend to see it in terms of language or style features, describing it as *advanced, formal, sophisticated, impersonal, professional jargon, good quality, elegant, a style not everyone can master, a very correct and sophisticated language present at universities, but rarely used by native speakers*, etc., rather than for example in terms of aims and goals (4.5%) (e.g., *source for other scientific research, aims at development of certain studies, a means of transferring student's own research/expertise, written for consumption in academic circles/writing with a purpose of making a scientific discovery, etc.*). A view of academic writing that emerges from the

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[1]   Students' sample responses are provided in italics.

data is one in which academic prose is primarily associated by the students with hyper correct formal language, which is at the same time intimidating and highly desirable.

The second research questioned posed in the study focused on the expectations that MA seminar teachers have of their prospective students' writing skills at the beginning of their MA programs as inferred from the responses provided to Question 6 in the teacher questionnaire (i.e.,TQ6: What entry expectations do you have of 1ˢᵗ year MA students' writing skills?). The specific expectations, clustered around general categories and arranged from the most to the least frequently mentioned in the teachers' responses, are listed below:

    a) Generic writing skills[2]. All teachers expressed their expectations concerning students' control of general aspects of writing texts in English, e.g.:

- Good writing habits: planning, outlining, drafting and revising
- Knowledge of paragraph structure
- Recognizing and producing different types of paragraphs
- Awareness of different types of texts with regard to their functions/ awareness of differences between genres
- Understanding the need to support claims with arguments
- Understanding the principles of the main thesis
- Awareness of the importance of cohesion and coherence (logic)
- Awareness of the need to study rules and models before writing practice
- Ability to use reference materials, including dictionaries

    b) Academic writing skills. Seven out of ten seminar teachers expect some experience with different academic texts and some prior experience in research writing, e.g.:

- Ability to read and process academic sources (research articles, MA theses, PhD dissertations) and to produce similar (argumentative) texts themselves
- Familiarity with academic writing conventions: understanding the need to provide references when using other writers' ideas, understanding of the role of evaluation and attitude markers in academic texts;
- Criticality, including the ability to voice critical opinions on the content read, critical assessment of texts read, critical use of evidence

The table below summarizes the key findings regarding the students' perceptions of their own writing skills and the teachers' expectations concerning those skills at the beginning of MA studies.

In their majority, the students' responses tend to oscillate around general rather than academic writing difficulties, such as issues of relevance, coherence, structure, and appropriate register. A large proportion of the comments expressed

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[2]   Teachers' sample responses are provided in italics.

Table 1. Comparison of students' perceptions and teachers' expectations

Students' perceptions f their own writing skills	Teachers' expectations of students' writing skills
a) problems with generic writing subskills (content relevance, logic, coherence, overall text organization) b) language problems of register, choice, and accuracy	a) generic writing skills already developed b) some experience with academic texts expected c) no specific expectations concerning general or academic language ability

revolves around language accuracy and sophistication/formality level. Problems pertaining more specifically to academic writing were identified and signaled by only a few students (e.g., *choosing and summarizing ideas, paraphrasing)*, and they mostly concerned accessing and, less commonly, using sources (e.g., *finding credible sources, using the sources that I find*). Interestingly, the question of how to effectively integrate other writers' ideas with own text so as to, for example, avoid accusations of plagiarism was not mentioned.

Most of the student respondents were not able to identify more intricate problems that writers of academic prose struggle with, such as synthesizing contrasting viewpoints or maintaining the balance between own and other writers' views, which represent global moves in academic prose. Instead, issues of word choice, formality of register, and grammatical accuracy featured prominently. This could mean that the experience in writing academic texts gained during BA level studies may be rather limited and academic writing is mainly associated with superficial formal properties, embodied by local moves. As for the MA seminar teachers, it must be noted that within the two common themes that were identified in their contributions (i.e. general writing skills and academic writing skills), several unique and idiosyncratic expectations were voiced. Also, in contrast to the students, the teachers were not preoccupied by the notion of language accuracy as none of them made a reference to an expected proficiency level or emphasized issues of formal correctness. This is not because it is taken for granted, but because this does not seem to be a realistic expectation any more, something that the students' responses also testify to.

The last research question that the study aimed to investigate were the respective expectations of the students and MA seminar teachers towards the academic writing course. The chart below presents the distribution of the students' responses to the questionnaire item addressing this issue (i.e., SQ10: What are your expectations towards the academic writing course during your MA studies?).

With regard to course content, over a third of the respondents expressed interest in writing specific text types and suggested topics to be written about (e.g., *writing research papers, articles, summaries, paraphrases, book reviews, exam format assignments/topics adjusted to specializations, topics from many fields, topics related to modern technology, scientific, cultural, related to broad academic*
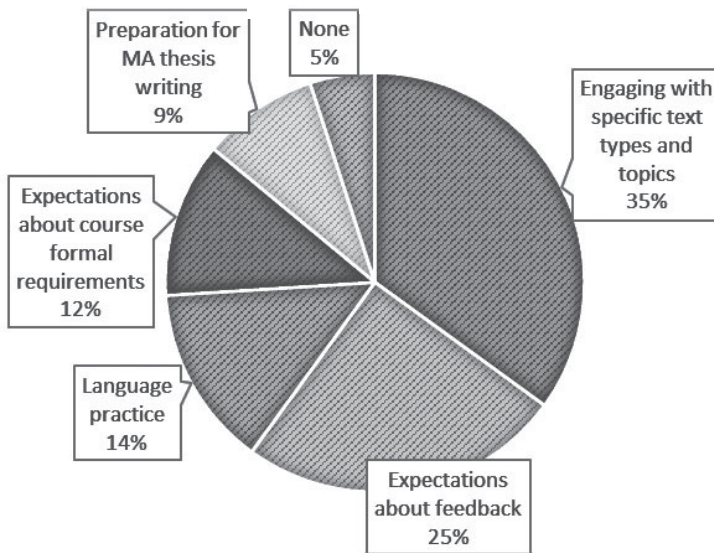
Figure 2. Students' expectations towards academic writing course

issues, contemporary, original, evoking emotions, etc.). Smooth cooperation with and regular feedback from the instructor was important for every fourth student (e.g., *possibility of consultation, helpful comments and questions, clear specific feedback on what is wrong/my biggest mistakes, systematic feedback,* etc.). Despite the concerns about the quality of their written language, only 14% of the respondents expected language work during the course (e.g., *improving professional vocabulary, working on formal academic style, paraphrasing badly written sentences, discussing grammar mistakes, exercises on error correction,* etc.). Even fewer students believed that the academic writing course is to help them prepare for their MA thesis writing. A similar number of responses concerned expectations about formal requirements to be met to get a pass grade (i.e., deadlines, number and balance of home/in-class assignments, number of allowed absences). A few students admitted to having no specific expectations about the course (e.g., *I accept what I'm given.).* Despite naming various general writing problems in their answers to SQ5, the students do not necessarily see these problems in terms of needs to be addressed by the academic writing course, as they do not suggest any types of writing practice that would cater specifically for those deficits.

As for the writing course expectations of MA seminar teachers, these were far more detailed and varied than those found in the students' responses. In general, all teachers mentioned the need to focus on various aspects of academic texts and the process of composing, but their comments were quite idiosyncratic. In addition to that,

most of the teachers agree that further work on generic writing skills and instruction in formal academic register is needed. The teachers' ideas about the expected content of the course, organized around thematic categories, are listed below from the most to least frequently mentioned ones, with sample responses in italics:

a) Academic writing sub-skills (all teachers):
- Teaching formal academic register
- Teaching skills of paraphrasing, summarizing, note taking, outlining
- Making students familiar with the concept of using sources and documenting them properly
- Critical reading of texts and writing summaries which are a critical synthesis of ideas, not only enumeration of ideas of particular authors (e.g., *emphasizing synthetic abilities rather than reporting without critical insight 'who wrote what'*)
- Raising awareness of the differences between Polish and English academic writing (e.g., *how the way scientific claims/research findings are formulated in the two languages*)
- Focus on hedging, modality, the importance of various reporting verbs/ reporting structures (e.g., *categorical vs. tentative claims: this research proves vs. indicates/suggests…*)
- Analyzing markers of stance, attitude, and evaluation
- Teaching about conventions of writing in specific disciplines

b) General writing skills practice (9 teachers):
- Emphasis on cohesion and coherence (BUT: *too much emphasis on technicalities, e.g. the use of discourse markers makes students think it takes care of coherence*)
- Teaching argumentation skills
- Emphasis on writing as a thinking process
- Fostering critical thinking and reasoning skills as a foundation for writing
- Teaching proofreading skills

c) MA thesis-related work (5 teachers):
- Analyzing and discussing parts of MA theses, e.g., introductions, conclusions
- Producing shorter texts needed for MA thesis completion, e.g., abstracts, literature reviews

d) Issues of feedback and student-teacher cooperation (2 teachers):
- Developing students' autonomy through encouraging self-correction following the instructor's feedback rather than expecting correcting/editing (e.g., *fostering the perception of the instructor as a guide, feedback provider, NOT editor of students' texts*)
- Preparing students for and engaging them in peer review activities (e.g., *making students understand the benefits of peer writing and correction*)

    e) Avoiding plagiarism (1 teacher)

    f) Other skills (e.g. *mediation skills – writing texts in English based on Polish texts*) (1 teacher).

The juxtaposition of the students' and seminar teachers' respective expectations towards the academic writing course reveals a considerable difference with respect to specificity of these expectations. Putting aside the obvious reasons for this discrepancy stemming from different positions of experience, expertise, articulateness, and the control of the metalanguage of the two groups of respondents, it is noticeable that despite their BA level writing and research experience, the students tend to express their expectations in terms of organization and running of the course, and not in terms of relevance of course content to their writing needs, for example seeing it as a remedy to the various difficulties they admitted to. Nor are they able (with a few notable exceptions) to point to specific aspects of composing academic texts that they need to learn about. The teachers, on their part, formulated their expectations mostly in terms of different layers and nuances of academic literacy, clearly assuming that some basic level of academic literacy has already been achieved during BA studies.

5. Conclusions and implications

The small-scale study reported above allows for only tentative conclusions. One reflection is that paradoxically, a large proportion of students, unlike their seminar teachers, do not associate academic writing course with developing various aspects of strictly academic literacy. Also, their expectations were expressed in terms of wants rather than needs, understood as receiving help in coping with various writing problems they have. Secondly, the students' main area of concern about writing, general or academic, is quality of the language. A similar emphasis on language correctness, complexity and range was not reflected in the teachers' views. The teachers take a reasonable degree of language proficiency for granted, but do not necessarily see it as a prerequisite for academic skills development. This finding is similar to that of Tait (1999) who also found that unlike students, teachers of content courses do not believe that proficiency matters. Despite students' noticeable preoccupation with language correctness and expected formality, their most serious problems with academic writing are not merely of a linguistic kind but connected with the acquisition of new discourse practices and this awareness on the students' part is often missing. As Ballard (1996, as cit. in Sowden, 2003) put it: "a high level of language competence will not in itself generate sophisticated thought" (p. 162). The challenge for EAP writing instructors is to focus on the problematic language forms (i.e. local moves) without diverting students' attention from more global aspects of academic discourse (i.e., global moves). Thirdly, the issue of plagiarism does not emerge in the data collected from the students, either as a source of concern

nor a recommended topic to be covered during the course, possibly because, as Thompson (2009) found, undergraduate students do not consider failure to reference a very serious offence.

Reference to sources is made only in as much as it concerns their availability, accessibility, relevance or selection, but no their critical reading, interpretation, integration and referencing. This overlook suggests that this aspect may be seen as less important.

Despite its narrow focus (students' declarations rather than actual written products) and a limited number of teacher respondents, the study sheds some light on why it is increasingly more difficult for students to write an MA thesis in a period of two years. Generalizing from the student responses, the level of students' academic literacy and awareness of its constituents on the onset of MA studies tends to be lower than hoped for in the light of MA supervisors' entry expectations. The one-year EAP course in academic writing is supposed to repair this mismatch. For this reason, apart from the provision for language work as required, key components of an EAP writing course primarily needs to include:

- Studying multiple academic text models, highlighting their key attributes, including strategies for expressing stance, synthesizing viewpoints, integrating others' ideas, examples of effective linguistic expression, examples of disciplinary language use, nominalization, etc.) (cf. Wolsey et al., 2012);
- Encouraging a critical, questioning attitude towards text content by generating questions, identifying similarities and contradictions, points of interest, challenges to own thinking, etc.);
- Emphasizing the notion of idea ownership vs. general (disciplinary) knowledge;
- Writing source-/research-based texts that involve engaging with different perspectives, comparison, evaluation, synthesis of ideas of multiple authors as a basis for developing the writers' own ideas. (cf. Morton, Storch, & Thompson, 2015)

However, considering the variability observed among the current crop of language studies candidates, also attested by this study, the above-mentioned gap needs bridging to varying extents with individual students. Opting for "the middle ground" in the choice of class content hardly satisfies more advanced students and still places too heavy demands on the weaker ones, and therefore some individualization of instruction is inevitable.

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