

Academic Writing and the Interdependent Relation between Language-use and Ideas

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Abstract

More than 90 per cent of the journal literature in some scientific domains is printed in English and the most prestigious and cited journals are in English. Countless students and academics around the world must now gain fluency in the conventions of English-language academic discourses to understand their disciplines, to establish their careers, or to successfully navigate their learning – K. Hyland (2006), *English for academic purposes*, p. 24. Are the differences between Western and Arab educational genres a reflection of differences in rhetorical and ideological codes, or do they signify little more than stages in an educational cycle? – J. Swales (1989), *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*, p. 66.

Keywords: academic writing, language-use, ideas

Introduction

Swales' influential CARS model of framing as well as introducing academic writing epitomizes a dominant model of Academic English (or English for Academic Purposes). It does so in relation to how 'Academic English' approaches to academic literacy, rhetoric, and writing tend to reflect a language perspective divorced from the knowledge-building process. The CARS model is typically defined in relation to the distinct functions of academic genres, related grammar structures and the distinct terminologies of specific academic discourses (Cf. also Swales & Feak, 2004). This also applies to typical Academic English courses (especially the short-course form) which generally cover all the parts, although typically tending to prioritize a particular genre, grammar or terminology emphasis. There are many students as well as language teachers who would agree with Hyland (2006) that around the world 'English for general academic purposes' generally fail to adequately or sufficiently help higher education students – especially those for whom English is a second or other language – to significantly improve their academic writing, literacy and rhetorical awareness.

However, we believe that Hyland himself is guilty of 'throwing the baby with the bathwater' in his denial that there can be a universal model of good Academic English writing approach and that this can be either taught or learnt. The work of Hyland (2006) represents an influential perspective that denies and strongly criticizes the idea that the universal aspects of a language-knowledge connection can be a foundation for the acquisition of academic literacy and related writing skills and knowledge – in particular for the development of a 'research orientation' (p.15). This is despite how he, like Swales, nonetheless acknowledges the centrality of the IMRAD model and thus reinforces a similar sliding definition. Rather Hyland advocates that for English natives as well as those students and academics for whom English is a second or other language, they only need and should only be taught 'English for specific academic purposes' in terms of the kind of genre model of English based on how 'many communicative activities are specific to particular disciplines' (p.19). This is no doubt useful advice to those who have a solid foundation of academic skills and knowledge already and 'active learning' interests in and approaches to the knowledge-building process. But many academic staff as well students in modern universities do not have this.

In this way such calls for teachers and learners to focus only on acquiring 'academic language specificity' epitomize an elitist and selective as well as advanced approach which tends to ignore the need for the average student (and also academic) to acquire solid academic literacy and rhetorical foundations in order to be a productive and effective academic writer. Less obviously it further epitomizes a 'spoken' model of genre which also stands in opposition to or denial of how academic literacy and rhetoric is primarily a 'written' rather than 'spoken' genre in terms of the dominant convention of formality typically indicated, for instance, by high lexical density, high nominal style and tendency to impersonal construction (Hyland, 2006) Thus Hyland also suggests that language teachers should re-double their efforts at a 'spoken' model for bridging 'linguistic worlds' in terms of specific discourse acquisition.

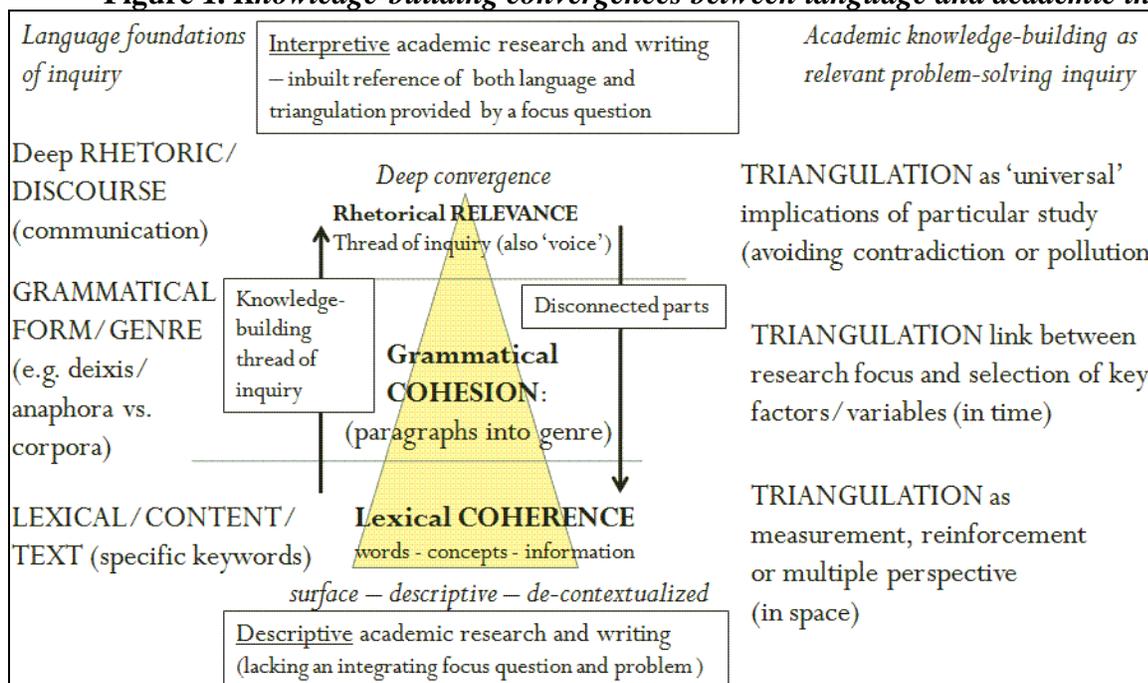
English can also have potentially negative consequences for students as they find it hard to bridge the domains of English in their classroom and their vernacular language in everyday life... The task of teachers is to bridge these linguistic worlds, not by privileging the home literacy of learners against the literacy of academic study but by helping them to see the discourses of academic engagement as central to the disciplines... (p.13).

In other words what most students need from an Academic English short course is a much more effective (or ‘optimizing’) focus on the essential written language skills and knowledge in terms of an integral link to the knowledge building process. Yet what they tend to get is an implicit ‘spoken’ model which is generally not relevant to academic literacy and writing and is often covered so quickly and in piecemeal fashion that many or most students either become confused or forget what they learn. As Biber, Conrad & Reppen (1999) point out, for instance, it is not only a waste of time but confusing to teach students in short course formats especially different forms of aspect (perfect, progressive, etc.) when written academic English generally does not use aspect – and likewise ‘future tense’ when this is almost never used in academic writing.

Academic Writing as a Convergent Language-Knowledge ‘Ecology’

We therefore propose that the language skills and knowledge typically covered in Academic English courses would be more effectively acquired and applied by students if framed more directly in terms of: (a) the authentic and applied academic knowledge of both general academic and subject specific discourses, and (b) the particular rhetorical requirements of effective academic inquiry and writing as modes of knowledge-building. In other words we think that the very concept of Academic English might be ‘optimised’ in terms of the natural interdependence between language and related modes of learning, inquiry and knowledge construction - modes which have long been recognized in philosophy, cultural anthropology and even certain constructivist models of teaching and learning. As suggested earlier, the useful distinction between surface and deep modes of learning (e.g. ad hoc, decontextualized and rote learning vs. synthesizing, applied, and transferable learning) in itself emphasizes the constructivist role of both natural languages and active thinking modes in knowledge construction (Entwistle, 2001; Biggs, 2003). Thus a re-framed Academic English model might be built around the deep rhetorical convergence also between applied knowledge and the use of language for interdisciplinary as well cross-cultural and diverse social contexts of communication.

Figure 1. Knowledge-building convergences between language and academic inquiry



Adapted from Richards 2010

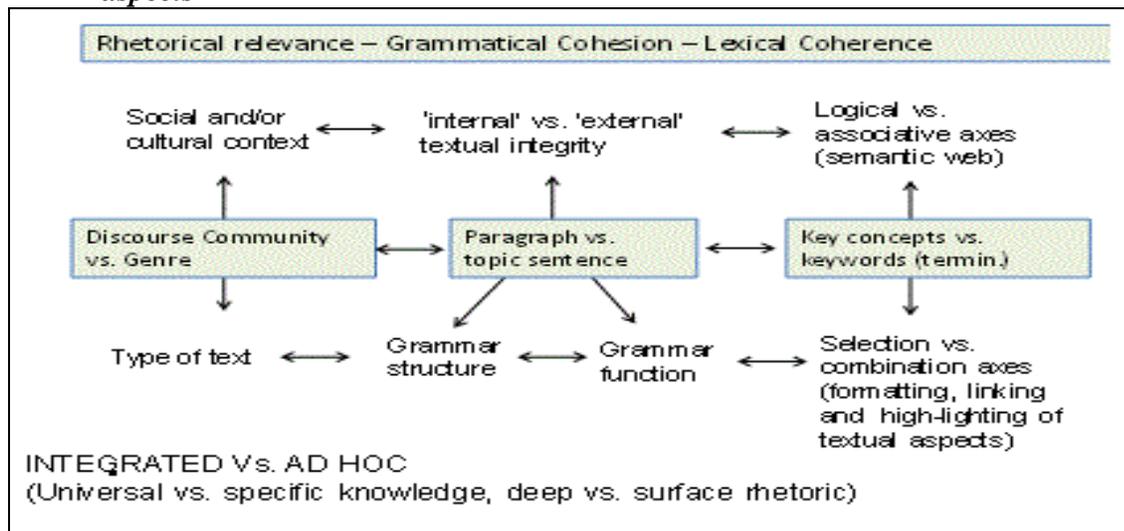
As discussed in relation to the ‘surface’ tendencies encouraged by the IMRAD model, descriptive academic research and writing tends to be reflected in a lack of integration of the related language features of terminology, grammar structure and the indicated alternation between an IMRAD structure and subject or disciplinary discourse. As Figure 1 indicates, academic inquiry and writing organized around a relevant problem reflected in an implicit or explicit focus question generally promotes and organizes a deep-level language convergence within an interpretive framework of knowledge-building. This deep rhetorical convergence should be reflected in an interdependent language and knowledge ‘ecology’ organized around a thread of inquiry reflecting a related convergence between individual acts of cognition and social structures of convention or communication. Likewise a relevant focus problem or question should inform and also be reflected by both the lexical coherence of any particular academic discourse (such as a written assignment or verbal presentation) and also the various forms, aspects and functions of grammatical cohesion. A particularly most useful linguistics model then for re-framing Academic English is perhaps Halliday’s (1973, 2004) Functional Grammar which comprehensively and integrally outline in relation to authentic contexts of human meaning-making the textual functions of coherence and relevance on one hand, and the similarly interdependent grammatical aspects of linguistic cohesion.

As is the case with critical reading skills and knowledge, the generic schemas and structure of academic writing also involve a fundamental distinction often confused or ignored. In terms of the transitions between paragraphs and also ideas typical connecting grammar structures typically reflect such organizing structures as cause-effect, description, and comparison or contrast. Just as transition words such as since, as a result, and because of typify a cause-effect structure of discussion, so too various schemas such as flow charts and mind maps epitomize a related verbal-visual convergence. However the key words and key concepts of any meaningful academic writing can or should be read in terms of an implied ‘semantic map’ of

lexical coherence. Good writers realize this and structure their writing to clarify as well as unfold and explore ideas through: (a) a vertical axis of conceptual hierarchies interacting with a vertical axis of associated synonyms and associations, and (b) related selection and combination language axes. Likewise in this way effective academic writing builds a related and convergent language and knowledge ecology.

We further propose to recognize how many of the key language functions of optimal academic knowledge-building relate to our earlier efforts to outline a ‘fail-proof’ framework to address the four key ways and stages that students tend to get lost in the academic inquiry and writing process (Richards, 2009, 2010b, 2010c). By ‘fail-proof’ we refer to a process of instilling in learners a set of both macro strategies and micro skills and knowledge which together as part of an optimal learning strategy might serve to transform academic presentation and writing into outcomes which make it more difficult for examiners to fail research papers, dissertations and various other academic writing assignments – whatever their methodological, rhetorical or cross-cultural assumptions and language conventions. In relation to the related processes of academic inquiry and writing, the concept of fail-proofing refers to an integrated strategy or interactive thread of knowledge-building conceived around the design of an inquiry focus and structure that includes both internal integrity and external relevance in terms of a particular problem or question addressed. Just as the concept of an integral ‘thread of inquiry’ represents a language as much as knowledge-building ‘focus and structure’ for optimizing the academic writing process, so too it represents an interactive and ‘deep rhetorical’ basis for productively engaging a reader. Such a concept not only links but also navigates the interaction between the macro dimensions of developing ideas and the micro language aspects. It does so in two related ways. As discussed earlier, in addition to providing an inquiry focus a problem and question also provides the alternately ‘internal’ and ‘external’ textual reference for progressive and inter-dependent lexical coherence, grammatical cohesion, and rhetorical relevance on one hand, and the transformation of accumulated data and information into knowledge on the other. In this way, academic writing and also reading might be conceived as an ecological process of knowledge-building framed by the tools of language with an authentic or applied focus the key missing link in efforts to teach or learn this.

Figure 2. Language structures and functions: Inter-dependent macro and micro aspects



Adapted from Richards, 2012

Figure 2 outlines the progressive and inter-dependent language structures and functions of related macro and micro aspects. Just as the macro dimensions of language use generally refer to the contextual aspects of knowledge and language-use, so to the micro dimensions incorporate various textual and discursive elements (Swales & Feak, 2004). A model which links these inter-dependent macro and micro aspects thus also serves to overcome an either/or notion of conflicting perspectives and replace or re-frame this in terms of an emergent both/and logic and connection. In this way the concept of academic or other writing genres and discourses may be recognized to alternately refer to both particular 'social and cultural contexts' and typical kinds of text or discursive structure. As indicated earlier, academic writing courses tend to focus quite distinctly on either the teaching and learning of particular disciplinary or subject-specific terminologies on one hand, and on particular grammar structures and functions on the other (e.g. Bailey, 2006).

Such a perspective serves to approach any particular writing or communication purpose as a deep rhetorical structure or unity which integrates related aspects of both lexical coherence and grammatical cohesion on one hand, and both a semantic map of key words and concepts and the integrated purposes of particular academic or other texts on the other. To adapt the initial quote by Brown, the various lexical and syntactic errors of especially second language academic writing indeed are relatively trivial compared to not so much the 'violation of anticipated protocol' but rather the discursive or textual lack of focus, structure and general organizational integrity. This is an internally emergent function of the language-knowledge convergence.

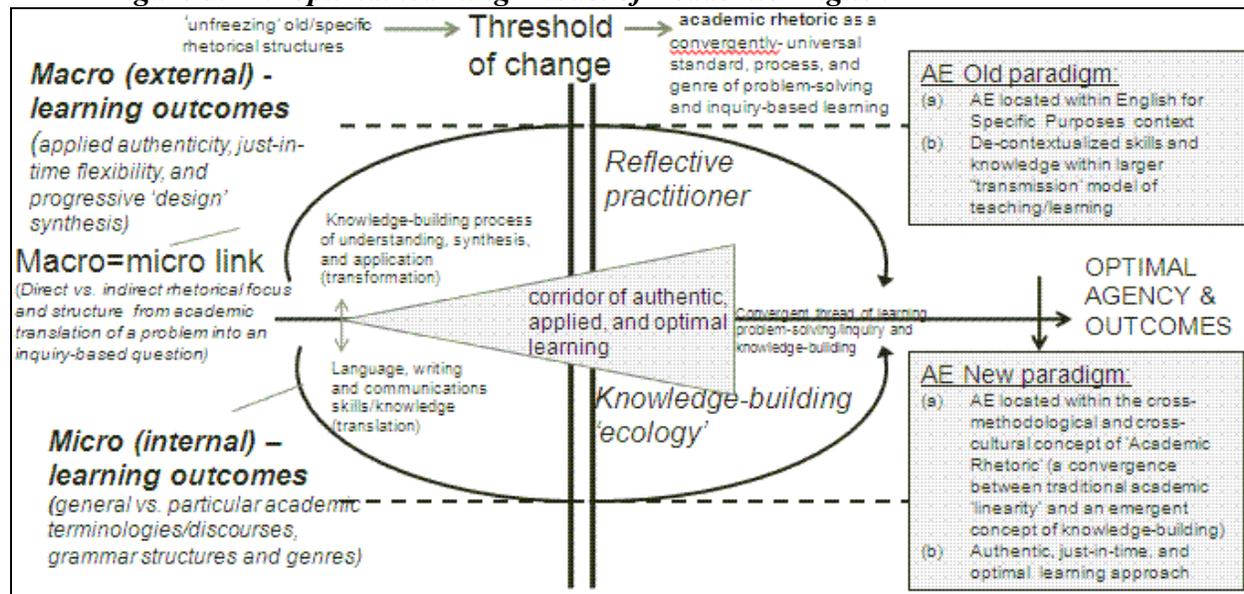
Conventional academic writing courses tend to emphasis either larger or 'externally' relevant textual and discursive purposes on one hand, and the 'internal' language features of a paragraph in terms of the alternate lexical and grammatical functions of the topic sentence. In the alternative view provided above, the paragraph not the topic sentence is recognized as the integrating unit of writing. At the macro level the paragraph serves to link both the set of developing ideas or critical discussion and related language functions in terms of the organizing or deep rhetoric of a composition. Yet the paragraph also co-ordinates the micro functions of lexical coherence and grammatical cohesion which are 'internally' built around topic sentences. In such ways a common thread of inquiry and reception links both the macro and micro aspects of academic writing.

Yet there is an additional dilemma to be addressed. Although as a form of communication academic writing should encourage clarity, conciseness and efficiency, the conventions of academic discourse and writing suggest that one should tend to use passive not active voice, the third person and not first person, and generally engage in the various 'modal' indications of caution and provisionality identified as 'hedging' (Crompton, 1998) – for instance, modal verbs such as may and might, and modal adverbs such as possibly and perhaps. Yet if such alternately linguistic and knowledge-building ploys become habits rather than strategic tools for avoiding over-confident, opinionated or arbitrary assertiveness, then the writer risks clumsiness, obscurity and pedantry. Our convergent framework recognizes that such ploys are integrated aspects of an overall knowledge-building ecology and an emergent balancing of both direct and indirect (also concrete and abstract) functions of language and knowledge.

Critical Thinking as The Key To Optimal Academic Knowledge-Building

One of the characteristics of Academic English courses is that they require a ‘just-in-time’ flexibility being typically reduced to short-term frameworks of intensive learning. Figure 3 adapts to the Academic English context an optimal design model (Richards, 2010b) integrating both teaching and learning purposes within a larger re-framed ‘macro’ rationale directly linked to and informing the micro of particular skills and knowledge – in this case, the either general or particular use of academic terminology, and the typical grammar structures of academic discourse and writing genres. As we discuss further below, an active engagement with and application of a ‘critical thinking’ process is the crucial key to achieving this convergence and integration of language and knowledge.

Figure 3. An ‘optimal learning’ model of Academic English



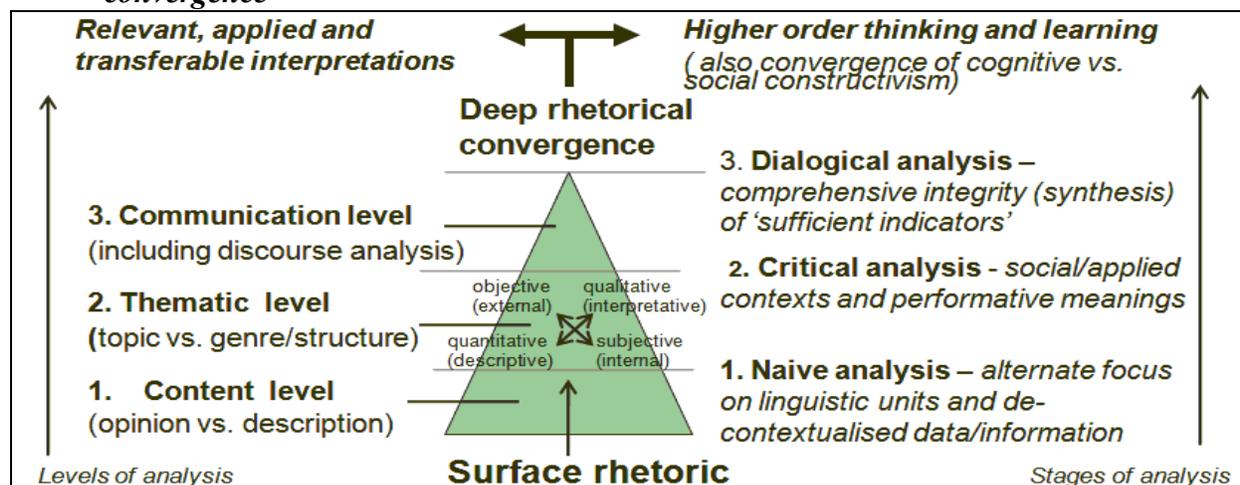
Adapted from Richards,

An ‘optimal’ notion of the learning process recognizes how the most effective practical or conceptual learning or knowledge-building links human language and thought (including body and mind as well as individual and collective forms of knowledge) in terms of dynamically focused and structured ways of establishing and proceeding from levels of naïve to comprehensive and applied modes of understanding via the capacity for reflective explanation. In relation to second language contexts of learning, such an approach adapts Krashen’s (1982) notion that the most effective learning involves grounding in authentic communication contexts of optimal comprehensible inputs and also comprehensible outputs. In terms of how academic purposes revolve rather around formal written purposes rather than non-formal speech contexts, such an approach re-frames this insight in relation to those of the writing process movement that purposeful (not just comprehensible) outputs in written form especially can assist with optimizing the knowledge connections between understanding and explanation on one hand, and on the other the interdependent links between human activity and reflection. To the extent that the most effective learning and knowledge-building represents an interplay of internal or self-organizing and external or ‘focused and structured’ aspects, we might therefore speak of a common ‘corridor of authentic and applied learning’ which transforms not just translates both

the surface and deep rhetorical as well as lexical and grammatical structures of human understanding and explanation.

Another reason why we have advocated that a focus problem or question is the key to a knowledge-building framework supported by language tools is that it also serves to avoid an arbitrary distinction between subjective and objective (also cognitive and social or conventional) perspectives in communication as well as how an integral research or inquiry design should inform either a qualitative or quantitative methodology of evaluation (and not the other way around). Figure 4 outlines a related model which navigates the either/or gap between the low-level mere reproduction or exposition of information (or related tendencies for knowledge 'regurgitation' or even plagiarism) and the opinionated assertion of views not sufficiently informed or supported by overall (as distinct from selective) evidence. Effective knowledge-building is thus associated with a deep rhetorical convergence of both language and knowledge indicators of understood, applied and transferable knowledge (i.e. 'higher-order thinking and learning'). The thread of achieving such an ecology or synthesis thus similarly navigates the alternate functions or levels of content, theme and discourse on one hand, and the interpretive stages of naïve, critical and dialogical forms of knowledge and analysis. It thus reconciles and builds upon the descriptive yet alternate tendencies of both content (including corpus) analysis and discourse analysis in order to achieve or encourage higher order-thinking, quality outcomes or transferable relevance (Charles, Pecorari, & Hunstan, 2010)

Figure 4. The related language aspects and interpretative stages of 'deep rhetorical convergence'



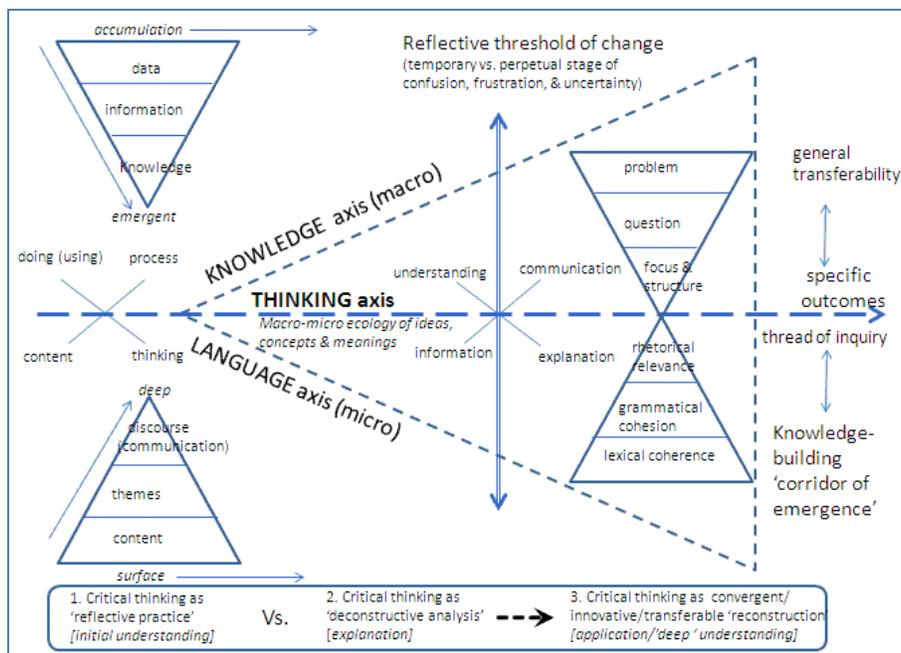
The model of the four related ways and stages academic writers tend to get 'lost' reflects either an ad hoc or retrospective and ultimately hasty or superficial notion the inquiry process (Richards, 2010). It has perhaps been most useful for our present purposes to recognize how these linked stages of the inquiry process also reflect the key elements or parts of academic writing. The symptoms of a written academic dissertation which lacks relevant focus and integrating structure include the following: no obvious or at least prioritized research problem or question, a literature review which tends to read as merely annotated bibliography, a descriptive methodology of evaluation, a related empirical project not adequately linked to a chosen theoretical context, and an ad hoc or retrospective write-up which reflects a similarly disconnected overall project. Thus we have summarized these four 'ways and stages' of

academic disorientation, confusion, and uncertainty as follows: unable to find a focus or topic, lost in endless references and ‘literature’, lost in accumulated data, and lost in the writing process (i.e. unable to integrate for either the self or the reader).

The paper has outlined the macro-micro links which converge the process of knowledge-building on one hand, and on the other the various integrated language functions associated with this and a related fail-proofing framework of academic inquiry design developed earlier (Richards, 2010) – integrated language as well knowledge-building remedies by which the four key stages and aspects of academic disorientation, confusion and uncertainty might be more productively overcome. In this model the verbal predication of a guiding thread of inquiry provides the focus and structure by which lexical cohesion, grammatical cohesion and rhetorical relevance may not only be achieved to optimize or enhance academic writing effectiveness, but also an authentic and integrating focus for also more effective acquisition and application of related language skills and knowledge.

We have further addressed the related question of whether Academic English might be taught, learnt or generally acquired in a way in which reconciles the growing awareness of fundamental differences in cross-cultural communication and stylistic conventions on one hand, with the challenge on the other of achieving and applying standards of universality or transferability in the academic knowledge-building process. The paper has not only addressed this larger issue in terms of identifying common cross-cultural and cross-methodological elements of a deep academic rhetoric. It has also similarly engaged the challenge of ‘fail-proofing’ a piece of academic writing in terms of language elements supporting an inquiry design which both develop greater academic integrity and also make it less likely that it will be rejected or failed (or more difficult for anyone to justify doing so). Likewise the paper has identified how the so-called linearity of ‘Western formulas’ and ‘Anglo rhetorical patterning’ of academic writing: (a) is a surface or stylistic convention, and (b) which rather points to how universality might be achieved in relation to the rather ‘internal’ and integrated language and knowledge-building reference points of the basic inquiry-focused design and structure at work in different types of writing genres. In this way also the typical error correction tendencies of a second language learning framework of Academic English might be re-framed in relation to the alternative emergent and integral approach suggested (Russell, 2009). In a writing process model an active correction process of editing dovetails with the ongoing revision for further clarifying and linking or building of ideas.

Figure 5. The three distinct stages and modes of critical thinking as the basis of an integrated as well as optimal model of academic knowledge-building



Adapted from Richards 2011

In this way Ricoeur follows the Socratic model of recognizing two related trajectories of thinking which cut through and resolve the typical conflict or opposition between objectivist and relativist or subjective notions of 'critical thinking' – and this apply a third stage and mode of 'critical thinking as applied reconstruction' based on emergent principles of dialogue and deep understanding. The first trajectory proceeds from the naive understanding of an initial stage of 'critical thinking as reflective practice' giving way to or being challenged and deconstructed in terms of critical explanation (i.e. critical thinking as deconstructive analysis). A second trajectory recognizes 'critical explanation' as a provisional phase rather than fixed perspective giving way to an applied convergence of deep knowledge and understanding transferable to and across different contexts. As Figure 5 outlines, the achievement of this reconstructive mode and stage of thinking for knowledge-building involves going beyond a fixed reflection mode and stage of 'either/or thinking' – that is to transform reflection into a temporary rather than perpetual stage of confusion, frustration and uncertainty.

Reflecting two distinct stages of this arc of thinking for more productive knowledge-building, academic writing conventionally proceeds to address an implicit issue/problem/question on the basis of proceeding from either (a) a passive/objective/'ignorant' standpoint to develop/build/describe a response; or (b) the articulation of an explicit hypothesis/position/argument which will then need to be somehow 'proved' or demonstrated in a meaningful and transferable way. In practice, of course, any critical inquiry of either a more conceptual or practical emphasis will inevitably (a) build to some degree on prior knowledge and implicit expectations related to either individual experience or conventional models or theories; and (b) proceed as an attempt to both change and improve our understanding and knowledge of some particular yet exemplary aspect of the world. In short, any academic thesis or other form of inquiry-based writing and reporting represents a retrospective effort of meaning-making trying to selectively make sense of either some unique perspective on or specific intervention in relation to some general area, topic or practice of human knowledge.

The model above typifies how the ‘active inquiry’ process exemplifies a constructivist and life-learning view of knowledge-building. Such a process reflects the three pillars and related generic stages of constructivist knowledge-building which are problem-based learning (formulating a problem), inquiry-based learning (convert into a central question), and project-based learning (the emergent process of developing a ‘focus and structure’). Some people will develop their academic inquiry writing more in terms of a practical emphasis, aim and audience. Others will have a more theoretical or conceptual focus. Either way, it will help to be aware that in either writing up a practical inquiry or making some concrete connection to ground a more ‘theoretical’/conceptual/abstractly reflective inquiry, an effectively relevant critical inquiry can be represented as either a predominantly provisional ‘naïve-critical’ arc or more substantially developed ‘critical-applied’ arc of knowledge-building.

In similar fashion to the interplay of surface and deep genres, Kuhn’s concept of a ‘paradigm shift’ generally refers to the process in which there is a change in the organizing models of theory and practice which inform an ecology of specific theories, concepts and ideas. However this also includes the fundamental contrast between a positivist view of an either rational or ad hoc and disconnected world on one hand, and an emergently ecological ‘systems’ view of human interaction within social and natural environments or contexts. In this section we have discussed how just as the most effective writing implicitly reflects a convergent ecology of language elements and the process of knowledge-building, so too a related paradigm shift is perhaps required in the way that courses in Academic writing are taught and learnt as a convergence of language and knowledge around an authentic and applied problem-solving process of inquiry. Building upon Krashen’s insight that ‘comprehensible inputs’ assist an optimal learning process we have focused on how academic writing is a mode of ‘comprehensible outputs’ may likewise assist an optimal academic knowledge-building process.

Conclusion

Can Academic English might be taught, learnt or generally acquired in a way in which reconciles the growing awareness of fundamental differences in cross-cultural communication and stylistic conventions on one hand, with the challenge on the other of achieving and applying standards of universality or transferability in the academic knowledge-building process? The paper has not only addressed this larger issue in terms of identifying common cross-cultural and cross-methodological elements of a deep academic rhetoric. It has also similarly engaged the challenge of ‘fail-proofing’ a piece of academic writing in terms of language elements supporting an inquiry design which both develops serves to encourage greater academic integrity and also make it less likely that it will be rejected or failed (or more difficult for anyone to justify doing so). The paper has thus explored the macro-micro links between the process of knowledge-building and the various integrated language functions associated with this and a related fail-proofing framework of academic inquiry design developed earlier (Richards, 2010b) – integrated language as well knowledge-building remedies by which the four key stages and aspects of academic disorientation, confusion and uncertainty might be more productively overcome. In this model the verbal predication of a guiding thread of inquiry provides the focus and structure by which lexical cohesion, grammatical cohesion and rhetorical relevance may not only be achieved to optimize or enhance academic writing effectiveness, but also an authentic and integrating focus for also more effective acquisition and application of related language skills and knowledge.

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Dr. Cameron Richards is an Australian academic with extensive experience of working in the Asia-Pacific region – including positions at Nanyang University, Singapore, the Hong Kong Institute of Education and the University of Western Australia. He has a multi-disciplinary background which includes specializations in academic research and writing methodology, educational technologies, intercultural communication, curriculum innovation, and new literacies. In his 15 years or so of focusing on new approaches to higher as well as school education he has developed a particular interest in the development of sustainable policy-building research and strategies in wider social as well as organizational context.

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