Conflict of cultures – the beginning of a new awareness
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It is widely accepted that knowledge is socially constructed (Bruffee 1986; Bazerman 1988, 1990, 1998) and that this leads to variation between the rhetorical choices and academic writing conventions adopted in different disciplinary discourses (Hyland 2000). This paper considers responses to a language awareness raising course on reading academic English, which was held in a college of agriculture in Portugal.

First, this paper discusses three common associations of the term culture in English for Academic Purposes / English for Specific Purposes contexts – ethnicity culture (Flowerdew and Miller 1995), contrastive rhetoric (e.g. Kaplan 1988; Mauranen 1992, 1993; Cmejrková 1994, 1996; Connor 1996) and disciplinary culture (Flowerdew and Miller 1995; Myers 1995: 5). However, in this paper only contrastive rhetoric and disciplinary culture are considered.

The course attempted to meet the needs of students and lecturers who are obliged to read academic texts in English and also to address the difficulties they are faced with. It thus attempted to raise awareness of the relationship between text form, writer’s purpose(s) and social context and to show how writer-reader relationships and roles underlie the linguistic devices chosen. The course consisted of 9 two-hour units, each one corresponding to a two-hour lesson with a similar structure covering 9 different topics. The participants in the course were all volunteer – 20 Portuguese agriculture students and 15 lecturers from the college of agriculture of the Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco, Portugal. In this study, the construct proficiency in English as a foreign language was measured using a cloze test (lent by the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading - Placement Test Testpack A 1990/1995). Lecturers were more homogeneous in their scores and also showed a higher proficiency in English than students (Figueiredo-Silva, 2003).

A range of qualitative and quantitative data before, during and after the course was collected. However, the present paper only analyses data that led participants to reflect on language, texts and knowledge/science. In addition to the cloze test, such data included the lessons feedback questionnaires, interviews and post-course questionnaire (Figueiredo-Silva, 2003).

This paper attempts to show how differences in educational and disciplinary backgrounds affected the way the course ran. During the course and/or after the course, participants reflected upon and pointed out some differences between academic writing in English and in Portuguese such as explicitness as a rhetorical strategy in English; different word order in English and Portuguese; a more nominal style in academic English; and even cross-cultural differences within academic texts written in English. However, participants’ comments on the above mentioned issues were not very clear or well-organised, as if participants had difficulty in pinpointing exactly what these differences were. Two related points may account for this difficulty. On the one hand, participants came from a different disciplinary culture and had different approaches and concerns about reading. On the other hand, some had not reflected about or thought of these differences between English and Portuguese academic discourse before. Moreover, they were not used to thinking critically about language and texts.

Second, the view that readers have to dig out the meaning of the text may be linked to the fact that, when reading, participants usually remained at the ideational level (Halliday 1973) of texts. They were not used to noticing the interpersonal aspect of texts nor were they aware that English is a writer-responsible language. Participants’ initial perspective on reader orientation, based on their L1 reading experience, was that the reader alone is responsible for understanding texts. However, as they became gradually aware of the differences between academic genres and began to notice the discourse features and the academic writing conventions discussed in the lessons, their perception of the writer’s role changed. Participants realised that in English the writer is responsible for effective communication and that this is achieved through the writer’s rhetorical preference for a reader-oriented attitude, which may facilitate reading.

Third, it is discussed how the attitudes of participants seemed to differ from those of the course designer/teacher because of their contrasting educational backgrounds and fields of research (i.e. they came from the hard sciences while the designer/teacher’s background was from the humanities and social sciences). The course participants’ view of knowledge was positivist and empirical. Thus they most likely perceived academic texts as ‘photocopies’/‘photographs’ of reality. Language for them is just a tool to express the truth found in nature and texts are faithful representations of the world. The course designer/teacher’s view, on the other hand, drew mainly on a social constructionist perspective accepting that knowledge within scientific discourse communities is also constructed (e.g. Kuhn 1970; Knorr-Cetina 1981; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Myers 1990) and academic texts are ‘sites of disciplinary knowledge-making’ (Hyland 2000: 104).

Finally, drawing on the insights gained from participants’ feedback and their performance of the
course a few suggestions are made on how these differences could be addressed. The Portuguese learners were found to hold different views from the course designer/teacher. This manifested itself in their opinions on language (i.e. the linguistic conventions of academic English and Portuguese), texts (i.e. cross-cultural aspects of writing and reader orientation) and science (i.e. its textual status as reified entity or constructed position) (Figueiredo-Silva, 2003). It is proposed that these divergences in perspective are grounded in the different disciplinary cultures to which learners and the researcher/teacher respectively belong and it is suggested that, by making students more familiar with the generic discourse features of academic texts in English and by developing their understanding that, as human creations, texts always carry values, a language awareness approach both facilitates the reading of English academic texts and improves participants’ ability to deal with alternative sets of values or discourse conventions.

References


