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## ACADEMIC ESSAY-WRITING

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The purpose of this article is twofold: first to describe a particular skill that should be considered basic to academic essay-writing in a foreign language, along with the difficulties students have in mastering it, and then to discuss likely-looking fields into which an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) materials writer might think of delving in order to help students overcome the problems.

The particular skill that I have in mind is the ability to write complete essays in one's 'own words', so avoiding wholesale 'lifting' of tailor-made language from textbooks, even if such lifting shows evidence of wide-ranging reading and skilful patching together of relevant chunks from a variety of sources. It has been suggested that this skill is not basic to academic essay-writing, but arguments also exist to urge that it is.

First of all, it must be asked whether at all and how often students actually consult textbooks at any time during their essay-writing projects. Evidence that they very frequently do so is: personal observations while assisting main-subject tutors to mark coursework essays, the assertion by some tutors that students often ask for potentially useful works to be recommended to them, and the testimony of other EAP specialists (see Swales 1976).

### **Textbook Copying**

A fairly strong argument against seeing the avoidance of textbook copying as a basic essay-writing skill utilises the legitimacy of cultural variation. According to this argument, just because copying from textbooks is frowned upon in European or Western tertiary institutions, this may not make it inherently unacceptable. If a huge

majority of students of a particular cultural upbringing see nothing wrong with writing their essays using other people's words, and if their tutors do not merely accept, but *expect* essays containing word-perfect textbook passages (as proof, maybe, that the books were consulted at all), then who are we to impose our alternative on them? By trying, maybe we are breaking a fundamental rule of ESP: not teaching according to the immediate needs of our students. This objection can be overcome by the way in which we define the academic essay-writing that this article is about. I propose explicitly to exclude textbook copying from the definition, although I would not wish to suggest that such exclusion is any form of condemnation. One result of having this definition will be that much of this article will have less relevance for that many more institutions. In my own institution, I had to go around asking lecturers of other subjects what they expected of their students before I could be sure that I was, indeed, teaching academic essay-writing as I understood it.

Another argument against seeing the avoidance of textbook copying as a basic teaching requirement is suggested by Swales (op. cit.). He argues pragmatically that, although copying is undesirable, it ought nevertheless to be tolerated if the end-product is more like an academic essay than it would have been without copying. This situation is likely to arise in the face of poor student command of the medium of instruction. Under such circumstances, a ban on textbook copying may lead to a total failure on the student's part to communicate anything of what he knows, with a consequent drop in morale and possible alienation from studying in general. There may be some wisdom in this, but my own experience is that any licence at all makes elimination of the evil (an aim surely never to be lost sight of) infinitely more difficult.

A student faces two main problems when he has found a useful textbook passage and

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he wishes to include what it says in his essay without copying. He has to find alternative correct language, and often he has been told by his lecturer to include 'references'. What do these problems mean that the EAP specialist has to teach?

#### **Alternative strategies**

There seem to exist two main strategies for achieving alternative phraseology: summary and paraphrase. In addition, there is the device of direct quotation, which can be used legitimately to include somebody else's exact words in an essay, but this has a necessarily restricted usefulness. Which of the two main skills is more the order of the day in a particular case depends on variables such as the purpose of the essay and the type of source material. The general usefulness of summary skills is perhaps more obvious, since textbook passages do so often contain irrelevant or unimportant stretches (e.g. cross references). Paraphrase skills might be more in need, on the other hand, when the source material is something like a detailed structural description, such as might be found in anatomy textbooks.

The teaching of paraphrase skills always seems to give more problems than summary. This is perhaps because students can see the sense of using fewer words to say the same basic thing, but see little point in wasting effort to say the same thing in different but equally numerous words. One way to motivate students in paraphrase exercises might be to relate them to pre-examination study techniques. Students could be told that the way to paraphrase is to transfer ideas from a text without having the text in front of them, but after having studied it and having tried to memorise what they see as important therein. It is very rare for the exact wording of the original to turn up after this kind of exercise. Conversion into note form can also be used as an intermediate stage in the exercise.

Summary and paraphrase may not be such obvious requirements for an essay-writing course as, for example, work on the organisation of ideas, on coherence and on

discoursal development. If, however, they are given little priority and copying from textbooks remains rife in student essays, the weighting given in the syllabus to summary and paraphrase skills ought perhaps to be revised.

#### **Textbook References**

The other main problem often faced by a student wanting to transfer information from a textbook to an essay is the requirement to include 'references'. When thought is given to what exact materials are most appropriate for students here, the area proves to be surprisingly complex. The first impulse is to teach students the phraseology of academic journals, such formulae as *x says that . . .* or *according to y, . . .* The danger here, however, is that such formulae become inappropriate in certain types of essay. Some essays are quite similar in their aims to a majority of articles in academic journals (it would seem) in that they try to present and justify original opinions. Like journal articles, they probably cannot avoid requiring some standard reference formulae because, so often, justification needs to make use of other people's arguments or discoveries. Essays requiring journal-type formulae are likely to occur in fields like literature or the humanities. Teaching materials for students in such fields would probably need to cover the conventions of standard textual references (i.e. the use of a surname plus a date, inserted in some form of reported speech construction), linguistic devices for transition from reported speech to personal ideas, and bibliographies. In the natural sciences, however, students do not seem to meet so much controversial subject matter during their earlier years. Even supposed 'discuss' essays seem to be much more descriptive in the sciences than elsewhere. Compare:

*Chemistry:* Describe the postulates of the Kinetic Theory of gases and *discuss their limitations.*

*History:* Discuss the role of missionaries in the economic development of Africa.

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Descriptive, factual essay writing, so common in the natural sciences, gives much less scope for originality than certain other essay types. Instead the student must simply prove that he is absorbing sufficient of a fixed mass of data. The result is that the use of journal-type references becomes impractical. For a student scientist frequently obtains almost all of what he writes from other people and if the textbook consultation is wide, and if his textual acknowledgements are honest, he will find himself required to write almost all of his essay in reported speech, which is surely not desirable.

I would argue that the only occasion when a textual reference to a writer's name needs to appear in a factual student essay is when the student is directly quoting that writer's actual words. Quotations would appear to be desirable when paraphrase is absolutely out of the question, perhaps because the original is particularly pithy or well expressed — a rare enough occurrence.

The final question to be asked here is: what ought to be used as a 'reference' in a factual essay in place of non-quotational textual acknowledgements, given a vague requirement by the authorities to have 'references' at all? It may be useful here to look in greater detail at the main purposes that any set of references might have. Here are three:

- 1  
To show the reader where he can read other works on the same topic (for corroboration, elaboration, background, or whatever).

- 2  
To prove that the author has thoroughly researched the field and thus knows exactly what he is talking about.

- 3  
To acknowledge that the original statement of particular information or ideas is not the author's.

Now in factual academic essays (3) has already been argued impractical, and (1) is surely unnecessary. On the other hand, (2) does seem close to what one could believe most course tutors in higher education might be after. And this function can be met simply by listing at the end of the essay all of the relevant works (with page numbers if necessary) which have influenced the content of the essay. Indeed I have come across plenty of tutors who are quite happy with such 'references'. It is therefore, on this type of bibliographical listing that the EAP materials writer ought to concentrate when dealing with science students. The teaching would seem to involve firstly pointing out the internal ordering of data within a single entry (author, title, publisher etc.), and secondly making clear the external ordering of multiple entries to form a bibliography.

#### Reference

Swales, John (1976): 'Preparation and Marking of a Botany Essay and Some Possible Implications for EST' in *ESP-MENA Bulletin* No 6.

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