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### **Hong Kong Undergraduate Students' Academic Writing: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Problems, Solutions and Strategies**

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#### **Introduction**

The impetus to investigate students' academic writing emanated from the observation that L2 Cantonese-speaking undergraduates who are in years three and four of their undergraduate programs struggle with the challenge of writing academic research papers. As undergraduates proceed through the final two years of their studies, they should have acquired, if not mastered academic research paper writing skills. However, the evidence indicates that students unsuccessfully adhere to the academic conventions of an academic research paper. In order to shed light on this issue, the authors believe that it is necessary to consider the L1 influence of the students' social, cultural and educational experiences, where knowing how to write in the L1 may not necessarily transfer to the L2 (Kern, 2000). Furthermore, the ability to write in a particular genre such as an academic research paper (Johns, 1995; Swales, 1990), selecting appropriate writing topics (Shen, 1998) and the challenges of ESL writing are critical factors which necessitate consideration. The consequences are grim if students are unable to develop the writing skills required of undergraduate study, and the risk for such students failing is high. Thus, this paper is timely in addressing students' L2 academic writing difficulties and the linguistic challenges they strive to overcome within the Hong Kong sociocultural context.

#### **Sociocultural Context**

The demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where English is now accepted as the de facto *lingua franca* of communication between nations (Crystal, 2003), necessitate the need for good writing skills. Since the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, a reconnection of Hong Kong's cultural traditions and history to China was firmly established (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). The shift in language policy from English-medium to Chinese-medium education is significant in the "re-sinicization" of Hong Kong (p.14). At the same time, Hong Kong people exhibited ambivalence towards their Chinese identity with the emergence of a robust local

culture and identity (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007, p. 121). Since 1997, the HKSAR government has followed a language policy of “biliteracy and trilingualism,” whereby Chinese and English are both official written languages and the official spoken languages consist of Cantonese, English and Putonghua (p. 135). The implementation of Putonghua as a compulsory subject in 1998 (for Primary One to Secondary Three) and the highly controversial move to replace Cantonese as the medium of instruction (p. 135) have resulted in public mistrust. Concerns with the possible erosion of Hong Kong’s values, culture and way of life (Wong, 2016), and a lack of faith in the one country, two systems, have contributed to the demands for full democracy in Hong Kong (Pomfret, 2016). The Umbrella Revolution of 2014 and the cross-border abductions of Hong Kong booksellers have served to strengthen such demands. It is against this backdrop that Hong Kong’s youth receive a local education with the hope of making the transition to tertiary institutions.

Today, most English medium institutions in Hong Kong, from kindergarten to tertiary level, are using the Content-and-Language-Integrated-Learning (CLIL) approach in the teaching and learning process aimed at language and content enrichment. The term CLIL refers to the teaching of content classes where the L2 is used as the teaching and learning medium (Coyle et al., 2010). This novel approach requires students to use English in all subjects except for Chinese courses at the English medium schools. In Hong Kong, Chinese medium schools do not have to use CLIL (perhaps only in the outstanding classes chosen by the schools). Currently, only the 114 selected English medium secondary schools are using CLIL extensively. Although Leung (2013) identified CLIL benefits such as an increased exposure to English and a reduction in language learning anxiety, certain drawbacks have emerged, namely, the students’ and content teachers’ lack of English proficiency. Yang’s (2014) Taiwanese study indicates that although respondents generally agreed with the benefits of CLIL, those students with lower language proficiency or content knowledge doubted the positive gains in their productive linguistic skills.

The HKDSE (The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education) examination was implemented in secondary schools in September of 2009, culminating in students sitting one public examination (Carless & Harfitt, 2013). Furthermore, the change from a heavily influenced British system to the HKDSE required students to enter university one year earlier and complete a four-year program instead of a three-year program. The content is aimed at “a more flexible curriculum...a broad-based curriculum...stronger synergies between schooling and future career or higher education options...lifelong learning.” (Carless & Harfitt, 2013, p. 172). The minimum university entrance level is set at attaining level 3 (out of 7 levels) in the English and Chinese language subjects, and Level 2 in Mathematics, Liberal Studies and two other subjects in the HKDSE examination by the end of Form 6. The Hong Kong government’s official policy today is to promote trilingualism (i.e., Cantonese, Putonghua and English) starting from Secondary 1. Consequently, secondary school students must divide their study time into learning not just two languages, but rather three languages, creating consternation among the Hong Kong public.

## **The Study**

This small-scale study was conducted in a local, privately funded Hong Kong undergraduate college from 2015 to 2016. The corpus consists of a total of eighty-four draft introduction sections of an academic individual research report (IRR), which accounted for 40% of the course grade. The corpus was collected over two semesters of the same academic writing course in a single year of study and was the first unmodified draft produced by the students. Although all of the students had been studying English since primary school, most of the students were novice English writers who had limited experience in writing academic research reports. Furthermore, the students appeared to be unfamiliar with both multiple draft pedagogy and peer collaboration tasks. One of the researchers was also the instructor for the writing course.

## The Academic Writing Course

The academic writing course employed a process genre approach (Badger and White, 2000, p. 157) by eclectically modifying the process, product and genre approaches to writing. According to Hanjani and Li (2014, p. 151) the process genre approach acknowledges “L2 students’ needs for linguistic knowledge about the texts, understands the importance of the skills involved in writing, and acknowledges writing as a social practice with special attention to purpose and audience.” Therefore, a model sample introduction was distributed in the first lecture, three-hundred and twenty-eight words long, to guide students in producing an introduction section for the IRR which matched the format of a social science research article. The three paragraph model was organized according to the inverted triangle structure of an introduction which begins with the general topic, provides background information, presents the issues, and ends by identifying the research problem. Furthermore, students were encouraged to choose topics of interest or familiar subjects which would be suited to an audience with a non-specialist understanding. The course lectures played a major role in introducing the students to the different sections of the IRR. Peer collaboration and evaluation was important throughout the course, both in the lectures and in peer evaluation (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

## Methodology

The analysis of the data involved several rounds of examining each student’s introduction for the most significant discourse features. The study focused on discourse features of “the ‘discourse value’ of lexical and structural items in context” (Flowerdew, 2001, p. 374). The most common words and phrases which were prominent throughout the students’ writing were manually identified, particularly those which were typically more likely to surface in speech. The samples were color-coded, listed and recorded against spoken-like iterations. The writing examples from the corpus of the students’ prominent discourse practices which were atypical when compared with the academic conventions of the research article genre were collected and analyzed.

The aim of the study is to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the prominent features of the language problems undergraduate students commonly produce in their academic writing?
- 2) What are the possible sources of such language problems?
- 3) What are the recommended strategies teachers could use to help students overcome their academic writing difficulties?

## Data Analysis

The examples in (1) and (2) indicate that the students in this study overused sentence-initial positioning, uncommon in academic prose, and which added an oral tone to their IRR’s.

- (1) *Because* of the potential danger reviewed by some professionals, some old trees are needed to be chopped off in order to reduce the loss of lives.
- (2) It [investor education] helps students to build up investment knowledge so early. *And* some of the students were already entered the real stock investment field before their graduation.

Samples (3) and (4) indicate a lack of register awareness and an inability to use the correct tone or register due to the inclusion of oral English vocabulary and/or a lack of academic vocabulary.

- (3) For example, many of us think about the next year's plan, *like* doing exercise every week, reading five books every month.
- (4) Thus, HK government launched different policies to limit carbon emission, such as the idling vehicle public consultation, introducing electric vehicles and promoting the usage of railway, etc. *So*, the green transportation is developing right now to replace the traditional system for building a better living condition for who are living in Hong Kong later on.

Errors in collocational patterning were observed throughout the data, which indicated a lack of familiarity with lexico-grammatical word combination. These included the following examples.

- (5) In this advanced information and communication technology society, it is so easy for teenagers *to grab the wrong information online*.
- (6) Besides, it is hoped that this study can play a central role for the readers *to take a glimpse of* the actual attitude of Hong Kongers towards their home country.

One of the most important academic writing skills involves "...learning to use hedging devices appropriately, without becoming over-tentative, [and] is an essential academic skill." (Blanpain, 2006, p. 45). The following illustrate errors in pragmatic appropriacy through the use of amplifying adverbs to express certainty, which are more typical of speech than academic writing.

- (7) Our image depends upon our body language. Men and women have different methods to present their feelings, so different expressions affect their friends' relationship. *Of course* there are positive and negative effects in body language.
- (8) In September of 2015, just after around 10 days of the start of the semester, there was a form 1 student suicide because of the study pressure. Nevertheless, before this, there was also an undergraduate of the Chinese University of Hong Kong plunged to death. Therefore, student suicide due to academy is *really* the problem that we need to be aware [of].

The most frequent example in this corpus of transfer from the L1 to the L2 was the use of *more and more*. The following are examples of mid-sentence L1 interference.

- (9) Nowadays, it is *more and more* common for people to have higher education.

Examples of high writer visibility were identified in 70% of the corpus. Novice writers were almost twice as likely to use the pronoun *I* as opposed to *we*, thus identifying *I* as the most frequently-used pronoun in the corpus. The pronoun *I* was employed a total of 34 times in the 84 introduction sections. The authorial pronoun *I* was notably positioned towards the end of the introduction where the research focus was introduced and helped clarify the direction of the research. According to Hyland (2002), this signaling of intention is indicative of a "fairly low risk writer role, simply signposting readers through the text" (p. 1100).

- (10) All in all, *I would like* to discuss more about the reason of people against homosexual through

this assignment.

The pronoun *we* was the second most frequently-used pronoun, occurring a total of 23 times in the corpus. The example below shows how the novice writers in this study establish their authorial position in assuming a shared opinion of certain aspects of the topic. This positioning of the novice writers' stance, by drawing on the support of others in the discourse community, adds a degree of credibility to their position. The most commonly observed collocation with the use of the pronoun *we* appeared as *we can see* and was positioned mid-sentence.

- (11) Since people are flooded by different kinds of advertisements in a day, *we* commonly *can see* beauty advertisements everywhere, which usually promote “slim is the best”, “the importance of whitening” etc.

The pronouns *one* and *us* were under-used in the corpus, exhibiting a single token of each. In example (12), the intention was to distance the writer from the negative and aggressive behavior of others who play online games. In example (13), the intention was to align the writer with those who use social networking sites.

- (12) For instance, the online that *I* am engaged in is considered mild and passive, but there are still signs of aggression shown towards other players. *One* can behave in a way that literally brings out their savage personality.
- (13) Nowadays, social networking sites become a common tool for *us* to make new friends or stay in touch with our friends.

Overall, the analysis of the corpus reveals that Cantonese-speaking novice academic writers experience difficulties in pragmatic appropriacy, over-use of conversation-like features and collocational patterning (Hyland & Milton, 1997). In addition, undergraduate students' academic writing is imbued with discourse features which are characteristic of speech (see examples (1) to (8) above). This study highlights an overuse of sentence-initial positioning, as in examples (1) and (2), which illustrates the use of an oral-like tone in students' academic writing. In addition, a lack of register awareness is visible in examples (3) and (4), indicating that students lack appropriate academic vocabulary. Errors in collocational patterning in (5) and (6) and pragmatic appropriacy with the use of amplifying adverbs to express certainty in (7) and (8) offer further evidence of spoken-like discourse. Mid-sentence L1 interference in example (9) was a prominent feature of students' writing. High writer visibility was significant throughout the corpus with the over-use of the first-person singular pronoun 'I', and the under-use of both 'we', 'one' and 'us'.

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Solutions and Strategies

The influence of the Hong Kong socio-cultural context on students' academic writing cannot be sufficiently explained by focusing solely on discourse features. The introduction of CLIL in English medium institutions does not guarantee that content teachers have the level of English language proficiency to support content teaching in the L2. Furthermore, the move from the British system to the HKDSE has simply replaced one form of examination with another. In effect, there is a disjunction between the curriculum policy and intentions and its implementation in the classroom (Morris & Scott, 2003), which means that curricula have only been superficially adopted. Hong Kong teachers are still guiding students through examinations which

are highly competitive and affect university admissions. Many Hong Kong teachers focus on correct English usage, grammatical accuracy and discourse organization (Mohan & Au-Yeung, 1985). Furthermore, Hyland (2002) draws distinctions between the Anglo-American academic writing conventions with regard to the author's role and the reluctance of L2 Asian writers who may be hesitant to promote an individual self, based on a culturally and socially constructed perspective of self which problematizes assertion (p. 1111).

Academic research report writing can be a challenging and formidable task for novice writers. This study provides evidence that undergraduates in the final two years of their academic study continue to include spoken-like features in their academic writing. At the very heart of students' difficulties, and a critical factor in academic writing, is students' English language proficiency (Cheung, 2013). Students must take responsibility for and be encouraged to achieve the required proficiency through self-study, and in particular the use of online resources to check language errors such as incorrect collocational patterning, pragmatic appropriacy and avoidance of L1 transfer. This indicates that students should develop an awareness of how academic vocabulary is used to convey ideas in authentic academic, writing which may offer a solution to the problem of over-use or under-use of certain discourse features (Martinez, 2005).

Teachers of academic writing courses have the responsibility to help students acquire the necessary skills and strategies essential to research report writing. This involves designing innovative curriculum and methods of teaching which advocate the process genre approach (Badger & White, 2000) to academic research report writing and which fosters peer collaboration and group work. At the same time, students should be encouraged to read and critically evaluate research articles linguistically and structurally, and the reasons why the texts are written in this manner (Hyland, 2003). Students need to understand the typical lexicogrammatical patterns which occur in the different stages of the target genre, and teachers should provide examples of the target genre, including appropriate linguistic choices.

Lastly, this study has highlighted novice writers' over-reliance on 21<sup>st</sup> century technology to search for research topics on social media, the Internet, and the Hong Kong context. For example, the research topics included social media monitoring practices, social networking, whatsapp and personal relationships, the negative impact of sharing personal information on social media and social media addiction. Other topics reflective of the Hong Kong context consisted of beauty and advertising, recycling habits, Hong Kong teenagers' identity, green transportation, ownership of public space in Hong Kong, the need for independent resources in Hong Kong and gender inequality in Hong Kong society. The novice writers in this study appeared to choose topics based on a combination of their familiarity in the L1 with the issues surrounding these topics, their level of interest and the assignment deadline.

One of the challenges facing students is how to sift through the massive amount of information on the Internet (Ensslin, 2007) and find reliable and valid sources of information (Jackson, 2009). Therefore, students select topics whose authenticity is verified by their familiarity with the topic, which results in a limited range of topic selection. Jackson (2009) suggests that as students fail to employ a focused reading strategy on the Internet, students' writing performance is typically reflective of weaker reading performance (as cited in Horning & Kramer, 2013, p. 50).

## **Conclusion**

Hong Kong tertiary students must strengthen their academic writing skills and acquire the ability to discern the differences between the oral and written forms of expression (or register). Academic writing skills have to be taught systematically so that learners comprehend the model product (i.e., a properly written research report with correct quotations following standard conventions). Thus, teachers should focus on the process involved in writing to a genre when guiding students in the development of their writing skills. Brown

pointed out that writing is a “thinking process” (1994, p. 321). It can be planned beforehand. Students are given a chance to think and develop their writing skills during the writing process. The “perfect” final product can be produced after multiple revisions.

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