

Sylvia GRUDKOVA

“St Cyril and St Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo

ACADEMIC READING AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

АКАДЕМИЧНОТО ЧЕТЕНЕ И ИНТЕРКУЛТУРНАТА КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТ

Статията разглежда компоненти от анализа на текстове, характерни за научния дискурс на английския език в контекста на преподаването на чужд език за академични цели. Очертават се теоретични постановки и педагогически практики, свързани с жанровите особености и функциите на текстовете, техния регистър, кохезия и структура. Поставя въпроси, свързани с възможностите на съпоставителната реторика да бъде предпоставка за формиране на интеркултурна компетентност с цел приобщаване към световната научна общност. Акцентира се върху потенциала на критическото четене като средство за формиране на интеркултурна академична грамотност.

Ключови думи: научен текст, академично четене, критическо мислене, интеркултурна комуникативна компетентност

The teaching and learning context in English for academic purposes (EAP) is highly specific. The language content (grammar and vocabulary) is limited mainly to academic discourse and the language skills that are emphasized are reading and writing. Texts and tasks are chosen for their potential to communicate information and to be representative of academic genres and their rhetorical structures. Students' motivation is marked by the desire to enter a course at an English-medium university or to access a particular academic community. Language teachers bring to the classroom expertise in the field of linguistics and methodology, while students might bring deeper knowledge in the subject disciplines. Besides, to know and to apply the rules of the target academic community inevitably presupposes having the necessary intercultural competence. The paper examines some aspects of academic reading in relation to text analysis and the merging of language and culture learning through task-based approaches and critical attitude.

Firstly, we have to clarify some theoretical concepts used throughout the paper and their role for the choice of teaching strategies in the field of reading comprehension – genre and functions of texts, register, cohesion and organization. Some aspects of academic text analysis have been simplified to serve pedagogical purposes.

The term genre has been used in many areas of knowledge – literary theory, linguistics, communication and media theories, rhetoric. It usually refers to a particular, distinctive type of text. Some familiar genres of academic discourse are research articles, monographs, textbooks, summaries, edited collections of papers, reference books, conference papers or reports. The conventions for creating such texts are familiar to the professionals of the academic community and they are their media of communication. According to Bhatia (Bhatia 2004) genres both shape and are shaped by the actions and sense-making processes of community members. The beginnings of shaping the notion of genre as central to understanding the social, functional and pragmatic dimensions of language use can be marked by Michael Halliday's *Language as Social Semiotic* (1978) and the English translation of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1984). The crux of the new genre theories is that genre is a socially standard strategy embodied in a typical form of discourse that responds to a recurring type of rhetorical situation. For language teachers and students the new conception takes up the place of the more traditional approaches with a critical rhetoric of genre. Students' attention is thus directed to difference and from a "cultural" perspective they learn to be aware that a new rhetorical situation might require new discursive structures and strategies.

The theory of teaching academic reading comes from analysis of academic texts and is influenced by some seminal works among which the Swales's *Genre Analysis* (Swales 1998). The practical value of these approaches is the assumption that their core is the idea that the texts in subject areas have particular characteristics. Swales suggests Moves and Steps for any research article introduction and thus raises our awareness not only about textuality, but also about the rhetorical considerations which govern the grammatical choice. The proposed model of the introduction section of the research article defines the modes in which academicians justify and outline their contribution by establishing in the first place a topic for the research and summarizing the key features of previous research. The next stage is to establish an extension gap of that work and thus the basis for the writer's claim is formed. The model consists of three main Moves – Establishing a Territory, Establishing a Niche, Occupying the Niche – and a number of Steps used to express each move. For example, Move 1 has the typical steps needed to show that the general research area is central, important, problematic, by introducing items of previous research. Move 2 could be realized by indicating a gap in previous research or by extending the previous knowledge. Move 3 has the most steps – outlining the purposes or stating the nature of the present research; listing research questions or hypothesis; announcing principle findings; outlining the structure of the paper; stating the value of the present findings.

Hyland (Hyland 2004) found a widely used structure of research article abstracts. He named several stages or "moves", each having a specific rhetorical objective: 1. Introduction (establishes the content of the paper and motivates the research; 2. Purpose (outlines the intention behind the paper; 3. Method (gives information on procedures, design, data; 4. Results (states the arguments and the main findings; 5. Conclusion (in-

interprets the results, draws inferences. These models have had a significant influence on teaching academic reading (and writing) both to native and non-native speakers of English and to professionals who wish to publish in international journals. However, there tend to be exceptions to the general pattern due to individual/cultural choices that suit a particular rhetorical prose and we will address this issue later in connection to the cultural differences that can be traced in academic texts.

All texts, however, must be understood as text *types* in discursive contexts – communicative occurrences involving, at some levels, the function of human interaction, as de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) have argued. According to rhetorical functions such as comparing, defining, classifying, texts are classified as narrative, descriptive and argumentative. Within each of these macro-functions there exist some more specific functions that relate to them – narrative/sequence, spatial description, instruction/process, comparison and contrast, definition and classification, cause and effect, problem and solution, argument + support/counter claim, evidence and conclusion. While genres are more specific for different academic disciplines, functions are more transferable across disciplines and are present in most “culturally marked” texts. By identifying functions, students can easily recognize ideas, use properly the linking words and expressions and generate patterns of language.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) use the terms *field*, *tenor* and *mode* to refer to topic, people involved and the function of language in the event when analyzing register. These characteristics relate to the language use to communicate ideas, to establish relationships and to manage the communication. Practical register analysis helps to identify a text as an academic one: the specific vocabulary for the field of study; formality of style, marked by impersonality; conventions for citation, hedging, specific linking words, the use of / long/ noun phrases, passives. Variations that are culture-specific will be considered further in the paper.

The linguistic method most fully applied to text-analysis is generally named *cohesion analysis*. This method is explicitly applied by Halliday and Hasan (1976), defining cohesion as a semantic concept that occurs “where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependant on that of another”. This method distinguishes the concept of a text from what could be a line of unrelated sentences. Thus, in the discourse one element presupposes the other in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by *recourse* to it. Cohesion is achieved through the use of different elements such as repetition, parallelism, ellipsis, co-reference, conjunction and lexical cohesion. Cohesion is a property of texts. Readers interpret the sentences as meaningful and use it to create coherence of what they read i.e. coherence is constructed by readers (and listeners). Besides cohesion, there are two more aspects equally important in terms of acquiring the conventions of academic style – theme and rheme development and the role of general nouns as signals for connections in texts. This perspective for text analysis, *functional sentence perspective*, was developed by the Prague School of Linguistics. The researchers were

interested in the ways writers *stage* the information in a text – keeping the balance of given information and new information. The topics of the sentence (themes) usually appear first, followed by comments (rhemes). The focus is the theme and its position guides the reader to the direction of the discourse. In English passive voice is used to change the focus, to transfer information from rheme to theme. These shifts of meaning should not be exercised out of the paragraph context because when students are trained to paraphrase academic texts, they move from theme to rheme, not considering the topic of the actual summary. On the other hand, it is typical for the topical themes in a developing text to contain a summary of previous statements. This summary is often exemplified by general nouns such as *problem, activity, issue, approach*.

Text analysis is part of the academic reading literacy, but one must bear in mind that there are exceptions to the general patterns due to individual or cultural choices that suit a particular rhetorical purpose. In this respect some findings of the contrastive rhetoric should be taken into account to view aspects of intercultural communicative competence in their relation to a more successful processing of academic texts. Two main contradicting assumptions exist about the nature of scientific discourse rhetoric – it is universal v. it is culture-specific. Widdowson is known to support the first, while the second was proposed by the linguist who coined the term *contrastive rhetoric* – Kaplan (Kaplan 1966). He outlined a famous set of diagrams to characterize sequences of thought based on his study of paragraph organization. The 600 samples were written by ESL students. Kaplan's theory of contrastive rhetoric has drawn wide responses. The criticism mainly addressed its limitation to expository texts, ignoring other text genres. That gave way to research on differences in genre, author-audience relations ways of configuring purposes and defining topics, including comparative studies of languages. In this relation a very exhaustive study by Vassileva (Vassileva 1995/96) concerning academic discourse rhetoric and the Bulgarian-English interlanguage should be taken into account. She tests the hypothesis that "...along with the universal characteristics, there are culture-specific features of academic discourse which are difficult (if not impossible) to acquire irrespective of the level of command of the foreign language." The writer concludes that the deviations observed in the Bulgarian-English interlanguage do not seem to be of the kind that impedes international communication. According to her, academic communication could be "set out in a group of its own – a kind of communication that demonstrates perfectly the possibility of using a neutral, culturally and ideologically unloaded language all over the emerging global village."

On the other hand, written English texts do display a fixed formal structure and division of content that should be taught to students. The conventions of organizing the topic and the use of formal means to indicate its organizational structure are very strict. An English academic text is divided into a distinct introduction, body and conclusion, science articles are headed by an abstract. A clearly formulated thesis is the necessary component of the text and it indicates the general topic of the article and the author's

approach to it. Long articles and monographs are usually further subdivided into chapters and subchapters, marked by consistent headings and logical numbering, indicating the hierarchy of the relations between the individual phenomena dealt with in the text. Authors usually have to observe a certain length limit, given in numbers of words, and conform to a prescribed graphical layout. The contents page is at the beginning.

Conventions of text division in English also apply at paragraph level. The preferred paragraph structure resembles the structure of the whole text. Usually the main idea of the paragraph is stated by the so called topic sentence which controls the content of the paragraph. It should be explicit enough and should have the capacity to be developed by supporting information and details. As this sentence gives the direction to the whole paragraph, its main idea, it is reasonable to expect to find it at its beginning, though it can be found further on in the paragraph. It is its function that matters and students should be taught to recognize it. The rest of the sentences in a paragraph contribute to the point by explaining, expanding or exemplifying the topic sentence. Some classifications identify four main structures of paragraphs in academic texts: fundamental (information is arranged from general to specific), coordinate (each new sentence supports the topic sentence and is equal to the previous one), subordinate (each new sentence gives a new level of specificity and supports, being dependent on the previous sentence), mixed paragraph structure with subordinate and coordinate sentences arranged in different modes.

Another way of analyzing paragraph development is by identifying the different ways in which the rest of the sentences unify the information, given by the topic one – by giving details (examples or illustrations), by comparison and contrast (description of shared features point by point or subject by subject), by process (exhaustive description made “step by step”) or by the combination of methods what is usually the case. Most of these contemporary classifications have the study of rhetoric as their basis. Anyway, if we try to devise a theory that reflects different epistemological, social and cultural practices in academic texts, there might be a possibility that theory or approach to become too complicated. A better, though not easier way to realize the connection between academic literacy and intercultural competence is to develop critical thinking as a key academic skill. This includes taking a stance, making connections, evaluating what the students read. The approach is closely related to the authentic academic activities and to the nature of reading non-fictional texts, because the reading process is often characterized by sampling, predicting, confirming and correcting – features that describe a more general, problem-solving process. The recent interest in developing critical reading skills draws almost no distinction between reading and thinking. Critical thinking and critical reading start from the assumption that what we read often needs to be analyzed and interpreted and the claims we make should be logically supported by evidence. The product of reading – comprehension is closely connected with the construction of meaning as a result from the interaction between readers and texts, the interpretation. The range of theories about the creation of meaning can be illustrated with the extreme positions of the objectivists

(meaning is simply transmitted), the constructivists (meaning is an interplay between the reader and the text, it is negotiated), the subjectivists (meaning is the interpretation of the reader, it is re-created). In practice these reading types overlap. Although critical thinking is accepted to be a crucial skill for academic reading and academic study, current research in EAP do not explain its content. According to some practitioners in the field (Alexander, Argent and Spencer: 2008) there are "... three main issues of delivery: scaffolding, stepping and staging for developing student confidence and ability in critical thinking skills and developing their own critical voice." The authors mean by *scaffolding* the support in completing a task by hints, clues, dialogue or by asking and teaching how to ask questions about what is being read. *Stepping* means to break down a complex task into smaller steps, which is extremely important when aiming at higher order critical thinking tasks, such as to devise a set of criteria to evaluate something and to define a concept from a set of examples. *Staging* names the process of developing higher order skills through the "sequencing the syllabus", which makes it possible at an early stage the students to use simpler level skills. For example, it is very important in academic work to distinguish a fact from an opinion. At an early stage the students can be taught how to understand if a statement can be checked and proved (fact) or if it is something which someone thinks is true (opinion). Later they can elaborate the language used for these notions and how they are expressed in different cultures.

The most consistently developed theory of critical reading and critical literacy is Luke (and Freebody's) *four resource model* (Luke 2000). The model describes reader's roles as a decoder (*code breaker*), a text user, a text participant and a text analyst. As decoders, readers need the understanding of words, sentences, paragraphs and texts. Decoding also presupposes bottom-up and top-down processing of texts and applying proper reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, using visual clues etc. As text-users, readers analyse the pragmatic practices of, its potential to serve different purposes. In the context of EAP, that resource has particular potential, as synthesising from sources is one of the main objectives. As text "analyst", readers speculate how the language is being used to position the reader. According to Luke and Freebody, texts are never neutral. They represent particular points of views and silence others. As text participants or meaning-makers readers engage emotionally and intellectually with the text to make meanings from it, which are relevant to their own needs and interests. That last resource is of particular help for challenging cultural values. Obviously, these "movement" to critical literacy could be valued for its two main aspects – the shift from the traditional focus on grammatical correctness toward pragmatics and sociolinguistics, the uses of language. On the other hand, critical thinking is intimately related to academic reading, because it requires clearly stated claims, supported with reason. At the same time claims and their support are open to challenge from people who hold different views or who might recognize a commercially or politically manipulative intent behind some of them Michael Byram designs a model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram 1994), based on the assumption that communication is an interaction, based on "... a philosophy of critical

engagement with otherness and critical reflection on self.” He suggests that English become the medium of instruction in immersion-type programmes in the areas of history, geography and social studies where alternative interpretations of the same event can be discussed and thus the skill of critical cultural awareness would be acquired more naturally.

In conclusion, academic reading as part of the language curriculum will meet the needs the students if they are trained how to read independently a variety of texts, typical for the authentic academic genres. Becoming autonomous is of great importance in the aspects of content and approaches in the subject they study and also in using English language sources in their studies. From a sociocultural perspective, students should learn to be critically aware and to view texts as shaped by multiple voices – the voice of the writer and the many voices that have contributed to the meaning of the text. Reading pedagogy in this respect cannot be reduced to simply teaching skills or strategies, but it entails a personal engagement and an identity as a participant in academic discourse who understands his/her culture within the global and comparative context and uses knowledge and diverse cultural frames of reference and alternate perspectives. Thus the competent academic reader also demonstrates a genuine appreciation of language, art, religion and philosophy of different cultures and accepts diversity as the foundation of society.

REFERENCES

Alexander 2008: Alexander, O., Argent, S., Spencer, J. EAP Essentials. Reading. Garnet Publishing.

Bhatia 2004: Bhatia, V. Words of Written Discourse – a Genre-based View. London and New York. Continuum.

Byram 1997: Byram, M. Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. Multilingual Matters Ltd. Clevedon.

De Beaugrande, Dressler 1981: de Beaugrande, R. and Dressler, W. Introduction to Text Linguistics. New York. Longman.

Vassileva 1995/1996: Vassileva, I. Academic Discourse Rhetoric and the Bulgarian-English Interlanguage. Чуждоезиково обучение, 1995, №6, 1996, №1, 2, 3-4.

Halliday 1978: Halliday, M. A. Language as Social Semiotic. London. Edward Arnold.

Halliday, Hasan 1976: Halliday, M. A. K., R. Hasan. Cohesion in English. New York. Longman.

Hyland 2004: *Hyland, K.* Genre and Second Language Writing. Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press.

Kaplan 1966: Kaplan, R. B. Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education. Language Learning. – A Journal of Applied Linguistics, 17, 1–20.

Luke 2000: Luke, A. Critical Literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. – Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 43, 448–461.