

Teaching undergraduate academic writing in Sweden: Notes on a new book with developmental and sociolinguistic perspectives

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Abstract

Thinking and Writing in Academic Contexts: A University Companion (Falk, 2011), is designed to help students, especially those with L2 (or incipient L2) English, increase their proficiency levels in composing essays and short research papers in English. The book also aims to raise students' awareness of the typical expectations academic readers have when they consider the quality level of a text. This research note first provides a brief description of the language proficiency levels of incoming undergraduate students who study English in Sweden. Spoken proficiency in English usually ranges from satisfactory to excellent among incoming Swedish students, but these undergraduates typically need support and feedback on their texts so that their writing gains sophistication in language, structure, and content. The theoretical portion of this research note highlights some sociolinguistic perspectives concerning the linguistic development of young adults relating to the "developmental imperative" (Eckert, 2000), the "linguistic market" or "marketplace dialect" (Chambers, 2009), and the dynamic continuum of standard English (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006; see also Karstadt, 2002; Falk, 2005). The second half of the research note provides a brief synopsis of the chapters in the book; it also mentions some of the approaches that are taken to share advice with readers.

Keywords: L2 English, the developmental imperative, linguistic awareness, Swedish/English contrastive grammar, academic advice.

Resumen

La docencia de la escritura académica en el contexto universitario sueco: Notas a propósito de un nuevo libro desde las perspectivas sociolingüística y de desarrollo

El volumen *Thinking and Writing in Academic Contexts: A University Companion* (Falk, 2011) ha sido diseñado para ayudar a los estudiantes, especialmente a los que tienen el inglés como segunda lengua, a adquirir un nivel superior respecto de la redacción de trabajos y breves artículos de investigación en inglés. Asimismo, el libro pretende concienciar a los estudiantes acerca de las expectativas que tienen los lectores de textos académicos respecto de considerar la calidad de un texto. La presente nota de investigación ofrece, en primer lugar, una breve descripción de los niveles de competencia lingüísticos de los estudiantes noveles que entran en las universidades suecas para estudiar inglés. El nivel de entrada de los alumnos suecos relativo al inglés hablado suele variar entre satisfactorio y excelente, pero estos alumnos por lo general necesitan apoyo y retroalimentación en la redacción de sus textos de manera que el producto mejore ostensiblemente en cuanto al uso de la lengua, su estructura y su contenido. La sección teórica de la presente nota de investigación pone de relieve ciertas perspectivas de carácter sociolingüístico relativas al desarrollo lingüístico de adultos jóvenes con relación al “imperativo del desarrollo” (Eckert, 2000), el “mercado lingüístico” o “dialecto del mercado” (Chambers, 2009) y el continuo dinámico del inglés normalizado (Wolfram y Schilling-Estes, 2006; véase también Karstadt, 2002; Falk, 2005). La cuarta sección de esta nota de investigación ofrece un breve resumen de los capítulos que componen este volumen y menciona algunos de los enfoques adoptados a fin de compartir consejos con los lectores.

Palabras clave: inglés como segunda lengua, el imperativo del desarrollo, conciencia lingüística, gramática contrastiva sueco-inglés, asesoramiento académico.

1. The communicative competence of incoming undergraduate students

In the department where I teach, the vast majority of incoming undergraduate students are able to express themselves reasonably well in spoken English. Many Swedish students already have a varied and expressive vocabulary in English. Nearly every academic term, I notice that some of the incoming students have impressively native-like pronunciation in English. Not surprisingly, their listening comprehension skills range from satisfactory

to excellent. Their typically high levels of spoken and listening proficiency are likely due to a combination of factors: (1) decades of cumulative media exposure to English in Sweden, wherein a large portion of the televised programming is in English (Dubbing English to Swedish is extremely rare, being limited to films and television programs made for young children; in addition, the lyrics of popular music, even songs written by Swedes, are frequently in English.); (2) a national curriculum for the subject of English in Swedish upper-secondary schools which has placed emphasis on communicative competence; (3) international travel, as quite a number of young students have already travelled extensively and sometimes even worked abroad for a short period of time; and of course (4) exposure and communication in English via the Internet, which includes networked games (see also Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2009).

University students, already possessing strong listening and speaking skills, are highly motivated to reach the next level(s) of proficiency in English. Many are willing to devote at least one academic term of full-time study in English. Incoming students in our department complete diagnostic tests at the beginning of a term. One of the tasks on the diagnostic test asks students to write a brief essay explaining why they decided to study English and describe some of the things they hope to learn. Students mention reasons that reveal their instrumental views. The diagnostic essays are usually nearly a page long, but below, in condensed form, are some (paraphrased) ideas that are frequently expressed by the students:

- After I graduated from high school last year, I travelled a lot and had to use English. I want to be able to express myself even better.
- I have always liked reading and speaking English. I want to learn more.
- Being better at English will help me in the other subjects I plan to study.
- I will probably have an easier time getting a job in the future if my English is good.
- I am going to be a teacher and will have to teach English to my pupils. I want to have better proficiency so that I can be the best possible teacher.

While it is rare that an undergraduate student mentions a reason for studying English that indicates a slightly more specialized focus, such as “I want to

increase my knowledge of e.g. Shakespearean drama (or) American fiction (or) word-formation processes in English”, than those suggested above, all in all university-level teachers of English in Sweden find themselves in a very favorable pedagogical environment. Even if the students’ reasons are still fairly general, they nonetheless have a strong sense of what more knowledge of English might bring them.

Accompanying these very promising pre-conditions for teaching L2 academic English, however, are some complex pedagogical issues specific to higher education settings. These pedagogical issues are comprised of interlocking developmental and linguistic ones. I will briefly mention a few of the developmental issues before I turn to slightly fuller treatment of linguistic development in young adulthood. As we saw in the typical types of reasons paraphrased above, students aim for general improvement. Some students have mentioned to me that they decided to study a term of English so that they have some time to think about what subject they ultimately will major in. Thus the newest undergraduate students in our department have yet to galvanize their academic identities. Over time, they need exposure to a combination of lectures, seminar meetings, discussion with classmates, and tutoring to help increase their awareness of university expectations of written English.

2. Developmental issues that intersect with linguistic awareness

Changing awareness levels and developmental issues are of course not restricted to concerns of students in departments of English at Swedish universities. Sociolinguists have ample empirical (often L1) data demonstrating that pre-adolescents and adolescents change their language during these formative, young years. A pioneer researcher in this sociolinguistic arena is Penelope Eckert, who has examined the concept of the so-called “developmental imperative”. Even if the focus of Eckert’s empirical investigations has been on pre-adolescence and adolescence (as in her 2000 study), we see in the quotation excerpted below that Eckert indeed conceptualizes the developmental imperative as a force that is perceptible across the lifespan:

(...) kids are continually trying on new behaviors and styles, in a continual and conscious production of a new self. This imperative continues

throughout life, but is more noticeable in childhood and adolescence, since by adulthood one has learned to be more subtle in one's efforts at self-reconstruction. Linguistic style is an important part of age-appropriate behavior, and sociolinguistic development is a continuous process (Eckert, 2000: 8).

The work of Chambers (2009), another sociolinguist who has been highly influential in accounting for the adjustments and even changes individuals make to their language over time, traces the linguistic construction and reconstruction of linguistic identities of young people. According to research he has summarized and interpreted (Chambers, 2009), quite a lot of linguistic remodeling occurs in young adulthood, too, as young people become increasingly conscious of the role standard language forms play in the so-called "linguistic market." The empirical studies cited by Chambers to support the notion of marketplace pressures are studies of spoken language; thus the section title for a portion of his chapter on change over time is "Young Adults in the Talk Market" (Chambers, 2009: 189). Much of early adulthood – not coincidentally the time university-bound individuals usually invest to pursue further education – involves making a transition to the next developmental level, and language use – spoken and written – is a central part of demonstrating awareness of standard norms. It is not a trivial thing to observe that as young adults adjust their spoken language to correspond to the linguistic market, they also fine-tune their written abilities – specifically written skills in academic English. University-bound young adults are influenced by intense and cumulative exposure to a highly literate academic environment, and in certain kinds of college- and university-town settings, such an environment promotes dense and multiplex campus networks. I have completed pilot studies of undergraduate students (L1 English) in America (Karstadt [now Falk], 2002; Falk, 2005) and gathered some limited additional data in Sweden to track whether – and if so when – undergraduate students adjust their viewpoints on standard patterning in English. Much of my inspiration has come from Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006), who offer a well-reasoned discussion of the standard continuum in English and its dynamic nature.

3. Sources of inspiration for the book on academic writing

When I began planning the contents of my book *Thinking and Writing in Academic Contexts: A University Companion*, my intention was to create a

companion book that would not only help students make a smoother transition into their new roles in a department of English but would also help them approach typical assignments systematically rather than simply wait for trial and error to give them insights. Many outstanding comprehensive handbooks (Anson, Schwegler & Muth, 2008) and course books (Devitt, Reiff & Bawarshi, 2004) already exist, so my purpose was never to try to produce a similar one. Instead, I aimed to write a compact book that would distill the issues I emphasize in writing courses and contextualize these for speakers of L2 English who are simultaneously being exposed to university expectations. The issues include urging students think about how to organize texts, recognize strong qualities in written texts so that they know what to aim for in their own writing, and talk about various strengths and weaknesses of academic texts in a constructive way. To fully-fledged academics, such cognitive and socio-/text-linguistic processes are nearly second nature, but for a newcomer to university discourse, very few of the skills surrounding these issues are automatic or intuitive.

Perhaps it is reasonable to say that much, if not most, of the developmental growth in academic writing in English involves increasing one's awareness of university language norms and culture. My focus in planning the book was thus to try to anticipate developmental steps that would help students expand their understanding of texts. In the early phases of drafting this book, I was inspired by the direct prose style used by Rachel Toor (and to some extent by Emily Toth, who sometimes writes under the pseudonym "Ms. Mentor"), whose columns appear regularly in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Judging by the number of these and other advice-type features in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* alone, the academic advice genre flourishes and grows, no doubt because it offers insights on improving academic writing (see especially Toor, 2011) and interpreting university culture and collegial communication (see especially Toth, 2010). Toor and Toth are probably among the more recent "academic advisers", because for many years generations of instructors seeking advice and support have been turning to the informative and accessible handbook on teaching at the college and university levels known as *McKeachie's Teaching Tips* (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006, is just one of the more than a dozen editions of this handbook). Certainly, ethnographic descriptions of universities have existed for quite some time (a fairly recent one with coverage of Swedish universities is Ehn & Löfgren, 2004). Inspired by these numerous observers of academic life, I wanted to produce a companion-style advice handbook for Swedish

undergraduate students that they can use as they write academic essays in English. The book turned into a style that is a “companion adviser” or “tutor in a book form”, that is, reminders of some things to notice about academic texts and how to handle quite a few of the typical problem areas.

4. Synopsis of the book on academic writing

This research note will now offer a synopsis of the content of the book (160 pages). The book has a preface, six chapters, an afterword, appendices, and a section with primary and secondary references. In most of the chapters, I provide scenarios describing some ways hypothetical students work on specific types of academic assignments, ranging from very short essays to degree projects based on research. My goal with using fictional but nonetheless realistic scenarios is to give undergraduate readers some distance from their own approaches so that they can try their hand at diagnosing what seems to be working well or less well for the hypothetical students. At the end of each chapter, I include a “question and answer” section called “Ask the Tutor”, in which I address questions students ask on topics directly related to the themes covered in the chapter. For example, a frequently-asked question on peer review is “What should I do if the feedback from my classmate contradicts what my teacher says?”, and in my answer I try to guide the student writer through ways of handling this thorny academic dilemma.

The chapters in the first half of the book deal with concepts relevant to the coursework of all undergraduate writers, L1 English and L2 alike: (Chapter 1) finding and developing a planning/pre-writing style that works well for certain kinds of academic assignments; (Chapter 2) talking about other persons’ texts, especially in peer review settings; and (Chapter 3) knowing how to add structural cues to texts by shaping topic sentences in paragraphs and making judicious use of transitional words and phrases.

The second half of the book turns to issues that are slightly more advanced (Chapter 4) and also more specific (Chapters 5 and 6). Chapter 4 presents fundamental issues and intellectual challenges in writing research papers, and it covers such areas as developing research questions, research hypotheses, and thesis statements. Chapter 5 focuses on standard language patterning. For students who are not accustomed to receiving extensive feedback on their written academic language, the comments they receive from their tutors in the first term of study can seem like harsh clarion calls. The chapter on

academic language (Chapter 5 “Making your language patterns more academic”) begins by describing the expectations academic readers deserve to have when they read a satisfactory text. The chapter then moves into a “how-to” handbook style. There is some specific advice to help students develop their level of academic literacy (See, for instance, the list “Some practices and habits of scholars with active minds”). The longest section in the chapter is comprised of “How to fix typical problems”. The problems presented and addressed begin with a host of some sentence-level glitches that are not by any means limited to L2 writers in English (e.g. sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and strange semantics caused by mixed metaphors) before the treatment in the chapter shifts to addressing some typical negative transfer patterns from Swedish to English. Such negative transfer patterns involve semantic false friends, as well as some rather pervasive L2 practices with punctuation and numerals that – to the reader accustomed to standard, edited English texts – reveal “Swenglish” patterning. To round off this chapter, I provide the readers with a copy-editing checklist that will help writers locate some typical problem areas (Toor, 2011), and then I conclude with a thematic “Ask the tutor” section.

Even though undergraduate students in my department do not write research papers until their second term of study, they must abide by a code of academic ethics already in their first term of study. That is, they must sufficiently identify all secondary sources they consult and use in writing their assignments and avoid all forms of plagiarism and academic misconduct. The final chapter in my book (Chapter 6 “Documenting your sources”) explains the basics of documentation, including the use of internal documentation, footnotes, endnotes, and the basic patterns in MLA and APA style sheets. As in the case of previous chapters, there are practical checklists that remind students what they need to watch for when they copy-edit their papers, and the chapter rounds off with an “Ask the Tutor” section.

5. Conclusion

This research note highlighted some of the developmental and sociolinguistic issues that guided me as I wrote a very practical university companion for writers. In the future, I hope to be able to devote more time to conducting research on the developmental cline of language standardization patterns revealed by highly proficient non-native users of

English. Until then, however, I hope that *Thinking and Writing in Academic Contexts: A University Companion* will help undergraduate students as they make sure steps toward being fully-fledged academic writers.

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