

Academic acculturation: The case of writing in an EFL teaching and learning environment

A B S T R A C T The transition from secondary to tertiary education is not just a change of physical environment, but it is also a change of culture. It has been shown that first year students' academic performance and their motivation to stay in school partly depend on how well they integrate into the university environment. In other words, students have to interact with their community through the reigning academic discourse, i.e., they must learn this community's communicative currency: the norms, standards, procedures and linguistic forms that constitute academic discourse.

This article eclectically summarizes five studies which try to contribute to a better understanding of academic acculturation by first year students of English language and literature studying English as a foreign language. We hope to contribute to the discussion of well-being and well-feeling of freshmen in their process of acculturation on the basis of their own introspections.

Keywords: academic acculturation, self-efficacy, academic identity, academic literacy, student self-report

1. Entering university

The first year in tertiary education is rarely smooth sailing and the transition from secondary to tertiary education is not just a change of physical environment, but also a change of culture. As is the case with change, it can have a stifling and even a detrimental effect on students (Brinkworth et al. 2009; Darlaston-Jones et al. 2003; Leki 2006). Since the first year in higher education is critical not only for how much students learn, but also for laying the foundation on which their subsequent academic success and persistence rest (Meyer et al. 2009: 1; Kimmins & Stagg 2009: 7), it is important to understand what is happening in the lives, minds and hearts of university freshmen.

Since Albert Weideman –in true applied linguistic spirit– has spent part of his academic life studying and defining the linguistic requirements for successful entrance in higher education,

in this contribution, we would like to shed some light on how the primary recipients of his research, i.e. first-year students, experience the new educational environment and how they cope with the ‘shock of the new’ (Devlin 2009).

Unlike in South Africa, the population discussed in this paper does not undergo any preselection for university. They do not have to sit final or national examinations, or take entrance examinations – qualifying or diagnostic – prior to attending tertiary education. The students discussed here do have to pass end-of-year examinations which are set and corrected by their own teachers following a national curriculum with specified objectives and learning outcomes. No external examination boards or externally determined and measurable criteria are involved. Consequently, in practice, the first year at university is a year of selection and of all students entering Flemish universities (i.e. in the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), only just over half (51.4%) will pass their first-year examinations (Vives 2010). Such a high proportion of students failing their first year at university is worrying and surely cannot be solely explained by the fact that university poses an unexpected intellectual challenge. Students entering university face personal and practical challenges as well. They experience a higher level of independence than they have had previously, which requires personal initiative and self-regulation (Chemers et al. 2001: 55) and they often find it difficult to adjust to what is new (i.e., the learning environment) and at the same time to what is familiar (i.e., learning) (Devlin 2009).

To become a member of the academic community, students have to become integrated. Learning the norms and practices of ‘the’ academic culture and becoming academically literate (Van de Poel & Brunfaut 2004: 330) is one way to accomplish this. It has been shown, that freshmen’s or freshers’ academic performance and their motivation to stay in school partly depend on how well they integrate into the university environment (Brinkworth Mc Cann, Matthews & Nordström, 2008: 168). In other words, students have to interact with their community through the reigning academic discourse, i.e., ‘the ways of thinking and using language which exist in the academy’ (Hyland 2009: 1). Complex social activities like transferring and demonstrating learning, constructing knowledge and disseminating ideas heavily rely on language; language is also the means through which people form personal as well as professional identities. Thus, academic language in use constructs the social reality of the academic community.

2. Academic acculturation

To engage with and integrate themselves into academic culture, students need to understand what ‘academic culture’ entails. Although most staff agree that ‘academic culture’ exists (Van de Poel & Brunfaut 2004: 331) and most students (in hindsight) have views and opinions about it (De Rycke 2010: 22) what it actually covers is still unclear to many.

We suggest that when norms and expectations of language use are taken together with the setting’s predominant values, assumptions and behaviours, the result arguably constitutes *academic culture*. However, each discipline (and even sub-discipline) tends to have its own unique conventions and norms—there is no single, monolithic ‘academic’ culture—but in all cases, these practices define and constitute the culture within which the community’s

members operate. In this paper we will focus on the conventions and competencies applicable to the domain of linguistics and literature and the use of English as a Lingua Franca (see below).

In the context of academia, the process of becoming academically literate may be conceptualized as an acculturation process by which one learns the conventions, norms and practices that constitute a discipline's academic culture. As many of these practices directly bear on discourse and language use, they are often language-specific. This fact suggests an additional potential barrier (or challenge) for second language (L2) learners, as these conventions (academic, linguistic and otherwise) are often different from the first-language conventions with which students may be familiar. Most worrying is that acculturation is rarely explicit. In other words, it is hard for students to recognize what it entails, let alone understand and adopt it (Cotton 2004; Kimmins & Stagg 2009).

Academic acculturation following the transition from secondary school to university is part of a well researched domain (cf Darlaston-Jones et al. 2009; Duff 2010; Van de Poel & Brunfaut 2004). Most research so far has reported on acculturation within the context of academic literacy and has shown how students slowly become acquainted with the conventions, norms and values of the (foreign) language and target culture. However, the fact that these values and norms are often left implicit (Kimmins & Stagg 2009: 5) causes many students to have trouble knowing what is expected from them. Several studies have shown that there is a gap between staff's expectations and students' interpretation of them (cf. Van de Poel & Brunfaut 2004: 329; Cotton 2004: 97). Essentially, staff assume that students are familiar with the conventions of academia and therefore do not explicate what they expect from students. Consequently, there is often a discrepancy between the interpretation of academic literacy and expectations vis-à-vis becoming academically literate between the teaching staff and students (see figure 1 below). As students and staff interpret academic literacy differently, it can be difficult for some students to learn to engage properly with the academic discourse required by instructors.

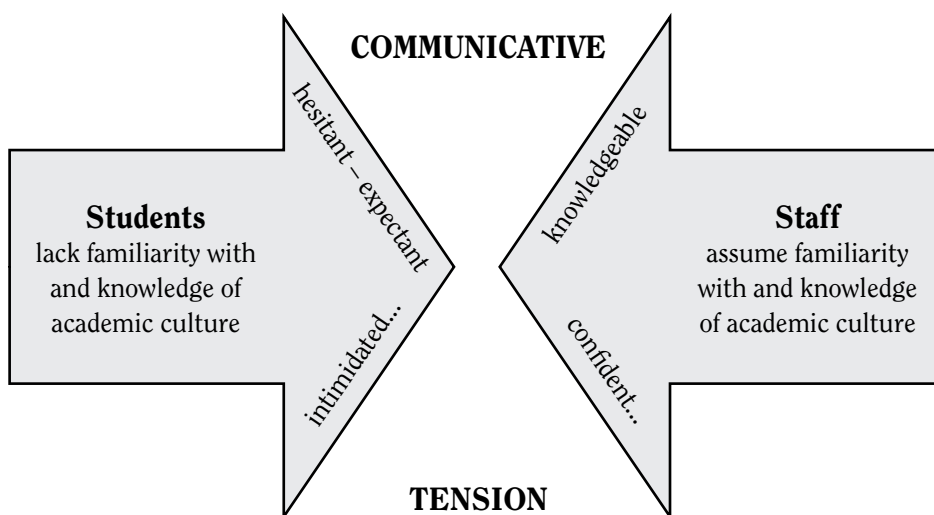


Figure 1: Student-staff expectations

This tension between student-staff expectations can have far-reaching consequences, since students are often indirectly evaluated on how they interpret the academic community's demands (Van de Poel & Gasiorek 2012). The mismatch of expectations does not only directly influence students' performance, but it also affects their psychological well-being. Feeling comfortable at university has proven to be an important factor for successful academic acculturation (Van de Poel & Gasiorek 2012). For instance, if students are too inhibited to approach their lecturers or peers to ask for explanation, they will never get anything explained and, in the worst case scenario, no one will even know that there are problems. A good relationship with peers in particular has proven to be relevant for a positive adjustment to the university environment (Enochs & Roland 2006: 64). Before we are able to address these mismatched expectations, students' experiences and views vis-à-vis the acculturation process need to be investigated.

In the following, we will eclectically summarize five studies conducted as part of larger projects by researchers affiliated to the research Unit of Applied Language Studies all of which try to contribute to a better understanding of academic acculturation in a foreign language. Most of these studies focus on academic writing, which may be seen as the epitome of academic expression and academic practice. Writing requires its practitioners to learn their audience's norms, values and expectations as well as the vehicle's constituents. Writing should be considered as a cognitive and, importantly but often neglected, an affective activity (cf. Hayes 2004; McLeod 1987).

3. Empirical studies

3.1 Study 1: First-Year Students Acculturation

The first study¹ we will draw on is, in effect, a needs analysis of first-year students studying English linguistics and literature at the University of Antwerp in which focus is on the affective component of their acculturation and more particular on the self-evaluation of their feelings of well-being throughout the first months at university. It is part of a larger project studying the relation between acculturation and self-efficacy, which can be glossed as the self-perceptions which help organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance (see e.g. Bandura 1986).

Methodologically, this is a longitudinal study which consisted of three questionnaires administered to first year students at different time intervals in the course of their first year of study. The first questionnaire (Q1) ($N = 133$) was administered during the first class of an academic writing course for first year students of English linguistics and literature. The second questionnaire (Q2) ($N = 118$) was filled in during the last class of the same course at the end of the first term, before the start of the examinations. The final questionnaire (Q3) ($N = 116$) was completed during a literature course with approximately the same student population at the beginning of the second term. Students had to judge statements on a Likert-scale and answer some open questions and their well-being was measured along four dimensions: socialisation (how comfortable students feel at university and around their peers), motivation (how enthusiastic students are to attend university and the degree to which they like their

¹ The study was mainly carried out in 2010-2011 by Annelien De Geest and partially reported on in 2012.

classes), comfort (how comfortable they feel speaking English in class [as students of English as a foreign language]) and support (how well-supported students feel by teaching staff).

This study was motivated by the fact that first-year students' self-efficacy beliefs and optimism have been shown to have a positive effect on their academic performance and general well-being in that optimistic and confident students are better able to adjust to a new environment (Chemers et al 2001: 62). Moreover, students who feel comfortable at university and around their peers are more likely to see university as a challenge rather than a threat, which positively influences the levels of stress they experience and – indirectly – their academic results.

3.2 Study 2: Master's Retrospection on Acculturation

The central question in this study² was: How do students of English become academically literate in the course of their studies? And more particularly: How do Master's students experience the process of acculturation? It aimed to shed light on successful students' interpretation of academic literacy and integrate the student perspective in a definition of academic literacy. Students' self-perceptions were investigated through an online questionnaire addressing five main areas: entering university, learning the skills, acculturating, dealing with emotions, and adjusting self-assessment. The online survey was completed by 22 full-time and regular Master's students in English linguistics and literature and consisted of 76 (mainly closed) questions.

This study was inspired by the fact that as indicated above, becoming academically literate involves two main parties: teaching staff and students³ and many components and phases. We hoped to find some recurring topics which could be helpful for delineating the concept. Previous research (Belcher 1994; Cotton 2004; Van de Poel & Brunfaut 2004) indicated that a discrepancy exists between the interpretations of and expectations about academic literacy of teaching staff on the one hand and students on the other. The different interpretations of academic literacy and the lived experiences of both parties need to be identified before the existing discrepancy between the concept as used by teaching staff on the one hand and students on the other hand can be narrowed down or even bridged.

3.3 Study 3: First Year Writing and Self-Efficacy

The third study⁴ investigated the effect of in-class writing assignments on first year students' experience of self-efficacy along the categories of difficulty, frustration, interest, success, usefulness and preparedness (Jorissen 2009-2010). Students ($N = 134$) completed in total six questionnaires (Likert scale and multiple choice questions) after each of the following writing assignments: Writing for an audience, writing a summary, constructing an argument, structuring an argument, supporting an argument, writing an essay. We hoped to be able to more clearly identify the effect of these hands-on assignments on the students' acculturation.

² Carried out by Ine De Rycke in 2009 and partially published in 2010.

³ We would like to gratefully acknowledge support staff, tutors, friends and family of first-year students who often enthusiastically take part in the process.

⁴ Carried out by Jan Jorissen in 2009-2011 as fulfilment for his Master's degree.

3.4 Study 4: An Efficacy-Focused Writing Approach

The fourth study⁵ looked into the effects of an efficacy-focused writing approach on students' perceptions of themselves as academic writers and studied the nature of changes in competence, confidence, comfort and experience in the course of their first and second year at university (Van de Poel & Gasiorek 2012). Since comfort has a proven effect on integration into the academic community, the effect on relative academic success was also studied here. A one page questionnaire (Likert and open questions) formed the basis for pre- and post-course survey responses (in year 1 and 2 of the study) which were compared with a two-tailed paired-samples t-test.

3.5 Study 5: English as a Lingua Franca

The final study⁶ looked at 69 young language students' attitudes regarding the object of their study, i.e. English, and more in particular it looked at the students' emerging conceptualization of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) on the basis of a questionnaire survey. The central part of the questionnaire consisted of 28 statements in which the students – on average 19.5 years old with a English language learning past of roughly seven years – indicated their degree of agreement on a five-point Likert scale regarding their perceptions of motivation for learning English, the ownership of English and its varieties, interaction with native and non-native speakers, and opinions about communication in English as a Lingua Franca. The data were coded and analysed with SPSS version 18. Since we wanted to see how representative the students' responses were, we relied on descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviation).

Since we are aware of the innate complexity of the motivation issue and the varied underpinning research frameworks (e.g., Gardner & Tremblay 1994, Dörnyei 2001), we sought to understand the relation between ELF as a theoretical construct and ELF as a reality in the life of these students through their experiences of engagement with English and native English speakers both within and outside the academic community and their perception of the aesthetics and functionality of the language. For the purpose of the present paper we will look at the students' sense of identity and well-being.

The five studies share some common features which we draw from to better understand how students experience acculturation in tertiary education. The object of study is students of English linguistics and literature. Since the process of academic acculturation takes time, we took a longitudinal approach and incorporated observations from first-year students in the course of year 1, compared perception of comfort and confidence across year 1 and year 2, and added retrospective reflections by Master's students on the acculturation process they went through. We also took into account the students' experience of the initial academic writing process and academic writing success as well as their overall learning experiences and incorporated the students' changing perception of their own academic writing profile. Finally, we also wanted to know whether students of English as a Foreign Language feel they are

⁵ This study was carried out by the authors in the framework of two writing courses at the beginning and end of the first and second year of the Ba-programme and replicated in two consecutive years. The questionnaire was administered eight times in total and resulted in between 33 and 112 valid responses per session.

⁶ This study was carried out in the course of 2010-2011 and published by Xu & Van de Poel end 2011.

members of the English speaking community. In doing so, we tried to get a better idea of the students' budding academic identity.

We are fully aware that the studies we rely on only considered students' perceptions rather than observed outside evidence, and that measuring changes in performance, rather than beliefs, requires a different kind of research.

4. Findings: The Magical Number Seven

4.1 Social vs Academic Acculturation

The data generated from first-year students (Study 1, 3 and 4) suggest that students' feelings of well-being do not change significantly throughout the first half year spent at university and they seem to feel quite comfortable from the first week onwards. The results of all items on comfort from Study 1 were clustered and the mean for each time point leaned towards the positive side of the 5-point scale (3.79, 3.77 and 3.73 with $\alpha = .61$ for Q1 (10 items), $\alpha = .59$ for Q2 (10 items), $\alpha = .53$ for Q3 (9 items)). A one-way repeated measures ANOVA showed no significant evolution in students' level of comfort over time ($F(2, 92) = .635, p > .05$). This is contrary to expectations when we consider earlier research on academic acculturation which shows that students gradually feel more comfortable in the new environment (Chemers et al. 2001). However, students' responses to open questions (in Study 1) suggest that, after half a year at university, they have not yet come to terms with the process of acculturation. More specifically, there seems to be a discrepancy between how quickly students acculturate to university as a new *social* environment versus how quickly they adapt to university as a new *learning* environment. Although students' social adaptation is relatively rapid, acculturating to this new learning environment appears to be more difficult: students seem to struggle with understanding and adapting to academic demands and expectations. According to the first-year students, one of the most striking differences between secondary school and university is the need for self-regulation, a requirement that worries quite a few students (see also Chemers et al. 2001). In retrospect, however, in (Study 2), the majority of students highly value the independence and freedom that characterizes university life even though initially the autonomy may have created a sense of loss.

4.2 Stepping Stones en route to Academic Acculturation

From the study where the Master's students of English looked back on the process of acculturation (Study 2) different acculturation 'stepping stones' emerge, i.e. receiving the first grades, writing the first paper (for 64% of respondents an extremely stressful experience), the first feedback moment and the entire process of writing the Bachelor's thesis (for 59% of students a 'crucial' experience en route to becoming an 'academic'). Students explicitly indicated that developing academic literacy skills is a slow process from the first realisation that literacy skills matter to gradually building an academic identity during which *learning by doing* prevails.

The process can be considerably slowed down and impeded when students need time to realize why academic literacy skills are relevant. Moreover, they often have to handle the experience of feeling alienated when having to communicate in the language used at university. Similarly,

they are often at a loss when they perceive texts as too complex and too difficult and do not know what else to do but ‘just’ read the text and give up on anything more daring.

Students grow and academic literacy is not only dynamic, but also personal, as every student’s academic literacy is the result of a string of personal experiences. In this study, becoming academically literate seems to be closely identified with the process and experience of learning a foreign language and gradually gaining language awareness.

Receiving the first feedback on written assignments and receiving examination grades are major landmarks for many students, and grades are experienced as powerful indicators of discrepancy between the students’ own evaluation of their work and the teacher’s opinion about it. These moments were often cited as emotional points in time at which students suddenly and rapidly gained insights in their academic literacy, an observation which was also made in study 1 where first-year students pointed out that the clash between their self-assessment criteria and the criteria used by academic staff has a wakening effect.

4.3 Assessment Criteria

The main challenge of acculturation appears to be figuring out what the criteria for assessment are (see also Cotton 2004). After the first examination period (after three months of course work), almost half (44%) of the students (Study 1 and 4) were dissatisfied with their examination results and 45% of the group claimed that they had expected better grades. To some students receiving their first grades was a ‘shock and a reality check’ (the students’ own wording in open responses). Given that the grading system used by staff reflects what is expected from students, it is problematic that students do not seem to be aware what these expectations are and why they are not meeting them. This proves that there is a discrepancy between students’ self-assessment criteria and the criteria used by academic staff.

In this respect, the data support the findings from other studies in which the gap between staff’s expectations and students’ interpretation of them has been acknowledged (Lea & Street 1998; Street 1999; Van de Poel & Brunfaut 2004). The fact that the students are unable to understand why and how they received a particular mark could also explain why their attitude towards their teachers becomes significantly less positive after the examination period: they commented that they felt staff did not communicate their expectations clearly enough. In doing so, they narrow down and define the discrepancy between students’ and staff’s expectations as a ‘communication gap’.

4.4 Human Support Networks

Study 2 shows that major support in the process of acculturation is provided by human networks in which peers play a pivotal role, a confirmation of Chemers et al. (2001) and Enochs & Roland (2006). Peers do not only offer psychological support which has a longitudinal and learning effect, but often the word ‘social pressure’ – meant in a kind way – is used to denote the academic relationship between peers: they keep each other informed of assignment deadlines, exchange course notes, provide support when tasks risk not to be finished on time, etc.

One other part of the human network which is close at hand is connections students have with teaching staff. However, it is not clear that students take advantage of this: more than two

thirds of first year students (68%) indicate that they do not turn to their teachers when having a problem (Study 1). The reasons given are as varied as: fear of being negatively judged or feeling too ashamed to admit that they did not understand a particular item. More than three quarters of Master's students (77%) (in Study 2) maintained that, in the course of time, their teachers 'often' or 'sometimes' overestimated their (writing) skills, a situation which has led to feelings of panic, frustration and anger. In retrospect, they advise teachers in open comments to show more empathy and understanding in particular when students are struggling with assignments. Because of the apparent face threat, feedback on written assignments will only work when it is integrated throughout the entire four-year program and approached with care taking into account the individual's needs.

4.5 Usefulness and Perceived Success

Apart from peers, students also seem to gain support from perceived success (Study 3). In year 1 of the Bachelor program students perceived the six guided assignments as increasingly *difficult* but only slightly more *frustrating* over time (which is statistically significant with a Wilks' Lambda of .000, 2-tailed). At the same time, the students reported that the writing assignments were *interesting* and *useful*. The perceived interest in the assignments has on average remained fairly high throughout the first term. With means ranging from 2.77 to 3.28 (on a 6-point Likert scale) on average the students experience the assignments as 'really interesting'. Overall, students think they did well on the assignments and they feel well-prepared for writing examinations and papers, mainly through the theoretical foundations of the writing course. A remarkable observation is that not one of the students indicated that discussions with peers helped to feel well prepared for future examinations and other evaluations. This could be attributed to the fact that these are the first assignments students work through and they still feel uncomfortable discussing academic writing in English even with a peer. However, in the course of their first year at university students become increasingly confident when evaluating written assignments with peers and even staff (Study 4). Thus, the high face validity of the writing assignments, which are the kernel of academic discourse, ensures that a significant group of students claims to feel acculturated already after just the first term. Admittedly, Study 1 shows that a 'reality check' comes some weeks later after the students received their first exam results.

4.6 Comfort and Competence

In Study 4 we considered the effects of an efficacy-focused teaching approach (actively targeting students' knowledge, skills and related affect) on English language and literature students' (self-reported) knowledge of what constitutes academic writing, the students' comfort discussing it, and the role this has in the students' perceptions of themselves as writers. Pre- and post-course survey responses were compared with a two-tailed paired-samples t-test and indicate that the efficacy-focused approach of the two-year writing programme significantly impacts the participating students' knowledge of academic writing. More in particular, the students' self-reported understanding of what makes a successful academic essay ($t = 6.64$, $df = 85$; $p < .001$) and ability to write one ($t = 5.32$, $df = 83$; $p < .001$) improved from year 1 time 1 to year 2 time 2. Also their comfort discussing and editing an academic text with instructors ($t = 4.28$, $df = 85$; $p < .001$) and discussing a paper with peers ($t = 2.73$, $df = 83$; $p < .01$) improved, as well as making suggestions about fellow students' writing ($t = 6.64$, $df = 85$; $p < .001$). In sum, the

students' perceptions of themselves as competent and experienced writers increased over time ($t = 6.29$, $df = 82$; $p < .001$)).

Knowledge, skills and affect are not independent factors; they interact with each other, influencing learning outcomes. All three contribute to students' feelings of efficacy, which in turn have been linked to the regulation of well-being and attainment (e.g., Bandura 1997; Honeycutt & Pritchard 2004; Pajares & Johnson 1996; Pajares & Valiante 1997; Stajkovic & Luthans 1998). Since 'self-beliefs can have beneficial or destructive influences' on students' academic functioning (Pajares 2003: 153 & 2007), it is important for academic writing programs and teachers to engage in nurturing students' self-efficacy, competence and confidence, in addition to teaching them content knowledge and related skills. Students' perceptions of themselves as writers are crucial for our understanding of how to facilitate their entrance into the academic community in a way that enables the academic discourse they engage in.

The Study 4 results suggest that an efficacy-focused approach to teaching and learning—that is, one which explicates expectations and requirements of the students' specific academic community while also increasing students' awareness, skills, and experience to help them meet those requirements—is an effective means of facilitating students' (perceived) socialization into their academic community, at least where writing is concerned. By extension, such an approach may also be seen as a viable means of addressing the gap between student and staff expectations of academic writing, and thus, of fostering academic literacy (and socialization more generally). While the programme we studied here is location-specific (to Antwerp), its principles are in the process of being adapted to other languages, contexts and programmes.

4.7 Tension Between Academic and Linguistic Identity

Entering academic culture and getting acquainted with academic discourse is usually accompanied by the development of an academic identity. Study 5 sheds some more light on the nature of this academic identity: All students are highly motivated to learn English and appreciate the language, but this is primarily because of the opportunity it offers to connect with people and their cultures. 41% of students in the study disagree with the idea that English belongs to native speakers only and 44% regard English as a universal property of all users. This corroborates earlier findings that secondary school students see English as 'a tool allowing communication with people from other countries' (Dewaele 2005: 132). Thus, the emotional vulnerability of students in learning English on the basis of the native standard norms is worth considering. Students are divided as to whether standard English is better than other varieties of English (37.7% disagree, but a high standard deviation of 1.021 shows division), and overall, they are ambivalent about whether the native norm should be set as a standard for learning (39.1% cannot decide). Nevertheless, half of them (51%) want to pronounce English as native speakers do and almost two thirds (61%) strongly believe in linguistic accuracy. At the same time, nearly half of the respondents (45%) feel inferior to native speakers. As a consequence, the students may experience a lack of confidence and even a sense of struggle with finding their identities as non-native English speakers. However, despite emotions of fear of failure, stress and frustration, and helplessness, more than three quarters of successful⁷ students at

⁷ We have to keep in mind that a considerable number of students have dropped out en route.

Master's level (77%) (in Study 2) describe the process of becoming academically literate as 'a not too bumpy ride' and they seem to have established an acceptable and workable academic identity. The results of Study 5 also suggest that students may see English as a global language, a view that could be at odds with the native-standard norm practised in education. This, in turn, presents a challenge for instructors. How to teach English in a way that addresses these conflicting views is a complicated issue situated in the ongoing discussion about the most appropriate pedagogic model of English Language Teaching in the midst of the global English as a Lingua Franca phenomenon (see e.g., Alptekin 2002; McKay 2003).

5. Conclusion: academically acculturating

In sum, even though first-year students feel quite comfortable at university from the start, a considerable number indicate that they experience problems with adjusting to the expectations and demands of the academic environment in that they are afraid that they will fail to properly address their academic work and express that they do not understand the criteria and values that form the basis for staff's grading system. This is why they expect more guidance and support from staff. There seems to be a discrepancy in acculturation with respect to integrating in university as a new social environment and settling in a new learning environment. Moreover, there is a lack of clarity surrounding the academic demands versus academic expectations. Emotionally, students are at a loss with respect to their need for self-regulation as opposed to the 'apparent' criteria for assessment (grading system). Not surprisingly, the students' attitude towards their teachers are less positive after the examinations, reproaching staff for not communicating their expectations clearly enough.

It seems important that staff explicate their expectations and those of the academic community more clearly in order to facilitate the process of acculturation. This may not only benefit students' academic performance, but may also contribute to students' outlook on the academic community more generally. Academic staff can contribute to the process and support it in different ways. One way could be to help socialize students as members of their academic community by targeting their sense of self-efficacy, i.e. their beliefs about their capabilities related to academic communication and its (meta-)language. Another way would be to explicitly address their expectations as opposed to or in line with the requirements of the academic community and in doing so, address and foster their academic awareness, knowledge, skills, and experience to help them meet those requirements. Moreover, students seem to benefit from hands-on experience and reflection about it against the background of self-regulation. Another way of supporting the acculturation process may be to let senior students speak out about their experiences and share good practice and advice with newcomers. The Master's students who took part in Study 2 have voiced their advice to future generations of young students in their own way:

1. Advice from Master's Students to New Students Studying Languages

How to Become Academically Literate

- Work on a subject that really interests you.
- Read in order to become accustomed to the register of the academic genre.
- Do not give up too easily when reading an academic text.

- If you struggle, look for help: in dictionaries, on the Internet, in the library.
- If you are scared of writing, choose courses you have to write a paper for.
- If your paper does not reach a pre-defined standard, have the courage to restart.
- Always ask for feedback, even if you have already received your marks.
- Do not be afraid to ask the teacher questions!
- Working intensively on your academic skills will pay off. Therefore, do all the obligatory tasks, and if possible, practice by yourself.
- Finally, do not panic or be intimidated by the work, you will get used to it!

2. General Acculturation Advice from Master's Students to Members of Staff

How to Foster Academic Literacy

- Explain to students the relevance of being academically literate.
- Embed critical reading and discussing texts in class. Students enjoy this and find class discussions stimulating.
- Introduce more feedback moments. If possible, provide individual feedback and give constructive empathic criticism.
- If a student's level of academic literacy is not what it should be, let them know, but not in such a way that it makes the student feel even worse.
- The teacher's attitude should be open and positive during class.
- Try to not overestimate the skills of the students, or do not take it for granted that students have mastered certain skills or topics.
- If possible, give the students more freedom by letting them choose the topic of the paper or the academic texts they have to read.
- Provide the students with enough guidelines and examples.
- Explain your expectations: be clear and specific about what you expect from your students and their papers.
- Finally, lecturers within one department should collaborate and aim for a coherent academic programme where the same standards and formal requirements are adhered to.

We see this overview as a starting point to open up the discussion of well-being and well-feeling of first-year students in their process of acculturation on the basis of their own introspections and retrospections. As academic and language teaching professionals, these suggestions help us realize that we can do a better job in stimulating and guiding our students en route to academic adulthood.

REFERENCES

- Alptekin, C. 2002. Towards intercultural communicative competence in ELT. *ELT Journal* 56(1): 57-64.
- Bandura, A. 1986. *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. 1997. *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Belcher, D. 1994. The apprenticeship approach to advanced academic literacy: Graduate students and their mentors. *English for Specific Purposes* 1: 13-34.

- Brinkworth, R., McCann, B., Matthews, C., & Nordström, K. 2009. First year expectations and experiences: student and teacher perspectives. *Higher Education* 58(2): 157-173. <http://www.springerlink.com/content/j1683741v277j6n2/>. January 12, 2011.
- Chemers, M.M., Hu, L., & Garcia, B.F. 2001. Academic self-efficacy and first-year college student performance and adjustment. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 93(1): 55-64.
- Cotton, F. 2004. 'The lecturer doesn't want my opinion.' Mismatched expectations: pedagogical approaches. In: Sheldon, L.E. (Ed.) *Directions for the future: Issues in English for academic purposes*. Oxford: Peter Lang. pp. 91-100.
- Darlaston-Jones, D., Pike, L., Cohen, L., Young, A., Haunold, S., & Drew, N. 2003. Are they being served? Student expectations of higher education. *Issues in Education Research* 13(1): 31-52. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier13/darlaston-jones.html>. February 2012.
- Devlin, M. 2009. The shock of the new. March 30, 2009. The Age <http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/the-shock-of-the-new-20090326-9c31.html#ixzz1ro7MrOQ1>. April 12, 2012.
- Dewaele, J-M. 2005. Sociodemographic, psychological and politicocultural correlates in Flemish students' attitudes towards French and English. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 26(2): 118-137.
- De Geest, A. 2012. Freshman year: a discrepancy between social and academic well-being. *Papers selected from the Junior Research Meeting – Essen 2011*
- Language learning and language use – Applied linguistic approaches*. Duisburg: Universitätsverlag Rhein-Ruhr. pp.167-175.
- De Rycke, I. 2010. A student perspective on academic literacy. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 159: 1–26.
- Dörnyei, Z. 2001. New themes and approaches in second language motivation research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 21: 43-59.
- Duff, P.A. 2010. Language Socialization into Academic Discourse Communities. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 30: 169-192.
- Enochs, W. K., & Roland, C. B. 2006. Social adjustment of college freshmen: the importance of gender and living environment. *College Student Journal* 40(1): 63-73. <http://www.projectinnovation.biz/csj.html>. August 28, 2011.
- Gardner, R.C. & Tremblay, P.F. 1994. On motivation, research agendas, and theoretical frameworks. *The Modern Language Journal* 78(3): 359-368.
- Hayes, J.R. 2004. A new framework for understanding cognition and affect in writing. In: Ruddell, R.B. & Unrau, N.K. (Eds.) *Models and processes of reading*. Newark, International Reading Association. pp. 29-55.
- Honeycutt, R.L. & Pritchard, R.J. 2004. Using a structured writing workshop to help good readers who are poor writers. In: *Effective learning and teaching of writing studies in writing* 14(1): 141-150.
- Hyland, K. 2009. *Academic Discourse: English in a Global Context*. London: Continuum.

- Jorissen, J. 2011. The effect of writing assignments on an academic writing Programme. Unpublished Master's thesis. University of Antwerp.
- Kimmins, L. & Stagg, A. 2009. Creating Confidence: Developing Academic Skills and Information Literacy Behaviours to Support the Precepts of Tertiary Academic Performance. USQ EPrints. <http://eprints.usq.au/6150/>. October 10, 2011.
- Lea, R.M., & Street, B. 1998. Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach. *Studies in Higher Education* 23: 157-72.
- Leki, I. 2006. Negotiating socioacademic relations: English learners' reception by and reaction to college faculty. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 5(2): 136-152.
- McKay, S.L. 2003. Toward an appropriate EIL pedagogy: Re-examining common ELT assumptions. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 13(1):1-20.
- McLeod, S. 1987. Some thoughts about feelings: The affective domain and the writing process. *College Composition and Communication* 38: 426-435.
- Meyer, M.D.E., Spencer M. & French, T.N. 2009. The Identity of a "college Student": Perceptions of College Academics and Academic Rigor among First-year Students. *College Student Journal* 43(3). *Academic Search Elite*. Web. January 12, 2011.
- Pajares, F. 2003. Self-efficacy beliefs, motivation, and achievement in writing: A review of the literature. *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 19(2): 139-158.
- Pajares, F. & Johnson, M.J. 1996. Self-efficacy beliefs in the writing of high school students: A path analysis. *Psychology in the Schools* 33: 163-175.
- Pajares, F. & Valiante, G. 1997. Influence of writing self-efficacy beliefs on the writing performance of upper elementary students. *Journal of Educational Research* 90: 353-360.
- Stajkovic, A.D. & Luthans, F. 1998. Self-efficacy and work-related performances: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* 124: 240-261.
- Street, B. 1999. Academic literacies. In: Jones, C., Turner, J. & and Street, B (Eds.) *Students Writing in the University: Cultural and Epistemological issues*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. pp. 193-199.
- Van de Poel, K. & Brunfaut, T. 2004. Bridging the gap between staff expectations and student interpretations of academic writing. *Belgian Journal of English Language and Literatures* 2: 329-335.
- Van de Poel, K. & Gasiorek, J. 2012. Effects of an efficacy-focused approach to academic writing on students' perceptions of themselves as writers. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2012.07.003>. August 21, 2012.
- Vives. 2010. Slaagkansen aan Vlaamse universiteiten: tijd om het beleid bij te sturen? Published briefing. KUL. <http://www.classicavlaanderen.be/informatie/cijfermateriaal/slaagkansen.pdf>. April, 2011.
- Xu, J. & Van de Poel, K. 2011. English as a Lingua Franca in Flanders. A Study of University Students' Attitudes. *English Text Construction* 4(2): 257-278

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kris Van de Poel

University of Antwerp

Research Unit of Applied Language Studies, Rodestraat, Belgium
and

North-West University, Research Unit Languages and Literature in the SA Context,
South Africa

Email: kris.vandepoel@ua.ac.be

Kris Van de Poel is a professor in Applied Linguistics at the University of Antwerp (Belgium) and heads the Research Unit for Language Studies. She is also an extraordinary professor at the School of Languages of North-West University in South Africa. She has taught academic writing at all levels for many years and is interested in data-driven research.

~

Jessica Gasiorek

University of California, Santa Barbara,

Department of Communication, SS&MS Bldg.,
Santa Barbara CA 93106

and

University of Antwerp

Research Unit of Applied Language Studies; Rodestraat
Belgium

Email: jgasiorek@umail.ucsb.edu

Jessica Gasiorek is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is associated with the University of Antwerp's Research Unit for Applied Language Studies and the School of Languages (NWU).