ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AT POSTGRADUATE LEVEL

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This chapter describes an experience of teaching academic communication concepts and procedures as part of the compulsory syllabus of an interuniversity postgraduate (master's and doctorate) programme run by six universities in Catalonia (Spain). We shall first provide a necessarily concise description of the most relevant characteristics of the institutional and academic context in which our experience took place. We shall then set out the aims, contents, methodology and forms of assessment involved in teaching the subject Procedimientos y cánones de comunicación científica y académica (Procedures and canons of scientific and academic communication) for which we are responsible. In conclusion, we shall present an analysis of the achievements and limitations of the subject's current format within the more general context of postgraduate studies, which will allow us to identify the alternatives that in our judgement would increase its potential.

THE ACADEMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

There is very little explicit teaching of reading, writing, or oral exposition strategies at Spanish universities. The few instances that do exist are mostly the result of initiatives taken by individual lecturers who do this sort of thing on a personal basis. The institutions in which we work also fit this model. There are many reasons underlying this and a detailed examination of them is beyond the scope of this chapter. In our opinion, a set of mistaken, albeit fairly widespread, beliefs among the educational community is responsible for the scant attention given to the specific teaching of academic communication strategies:

- The belief that the learning of oral and written language occurs only in the first few years of compulsory education, which leads oral and written language to be treated as an "object" of knowledge in these early stages. Thereafter these capacities acquire the status of learning "instruments" (and lose their former status).
- The consideration that oral and written language, as communication and (to a lesser extent) representation tools, remain invariable throughout a person's life, while what varies are the situations in which these tools are "applied."

The experience described in this chapter is based on radically different ideas, which are succinctly set out below (see section 2). This experience is part of an official postgraduate educational psychology programme formed by the Interuniversity Master's Degree in Educational Psychology (MIPE according to its Catalan and Spanish initials) and the Interuniversity Doctoral Degree in Educational Psychology (DIPE). This postgraduate course, which has been taught since the academic year 2004-2005, is a joint initiative by six universities in Catalonia (Spain) —the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the University of Barcelona, the University of Girona, the University of Lleida, Ramon Llull University, and Rovira i Virgili/Tarragona University—led by Barcelona University. It is aimed at students and professionals interested in acquiring a solid theoretical and practical grounding in the contributions of psychological knowledge to educational theory and practice, and also sets out to stimulate research and scientific production in the field of educational psychology.

There are fifty places available in the course every year and there exist specific admission criteria for selecting applicants, as the number of applicants always far exceeds the number of places. The students come from a mixture of geographical origins and educational backgrounds: there are students from Catalonia and other parts of Spain, but also from various European and Latin American countries (Portugal, the Netherlands, Sweden, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, etc.); students of psychology, education or other related subjects; students who have just graduated and others who come back to university to complete their education following a period of employment. This means that the academic cultures co-existing in this postgraduate course are diverse, which makes it extremely rich and, at the same time, requires spaces where students, especially those doing a doctorate, can get to know and examine the academic requirements specific to the institutions where they are being educated.

Meeting this requirement and simultaneously responding to the students' wide variety of interests has implications for the organisation of the curriculum. This provides for two educational profiles, one of a professional nature, linked to psychoeducational intervention in a broad sense and leading to a master's

degree upon satisfactory completion of 90 credits; the other of a more academic nature catering to research and linked to doctorate studies.

Students opting for a doctorate must take at least 60 postgraduate course credits—although most of them actually take the full 90 credits allowing them to obtain the master's degree—and carry out a research project in one of the 16 groups taking part in the DIPE (for more information, go to http://www.psyed.edu.es).

The postgraduate curriculum is organised as follows:

- compulsory common core credits: 20
- compulsory profile credits: 20, consisting of a practicum, of which there are two modalities: professional and research
- optional credits: 50, to be chosen from 42 subjects, each of which is worth five credits. Some subjects are professionally oriented, while others are research oriented, although at the present time most of them cater to both profiles.

All students, irrespective of the profile they choose—professional or research—must take the compulsory common core credits, which are divided into various subjects, some of a conceptual or methodological nature—Culture, Development and Learning in Educational Psychology; Methodology and Epistemology in Psychoeducational Research; Current Approaches and Trends in Educational Psychology— and others of a more applied nature: Professional Environments and Contexts in Educational Psychology; Procedures, Canons and Practices of Scientific and Professional Communication in Educational Psychology.

The fact that this last-mentioned subject (Procedures, Canons and Practices . . .) is compulsory shows that those responsible for the course think its contents are equally necessary whether students are intending to go into research (doctorate) or their interests lead them towards professional specialisation (master's degree). The experience acquired over several years' teaching on the master's and doctorate programmes had made it plain that postgraduate students often have difficulties in coping with the requirements of oral and written academic and scientific communication. Moreover, contrary to what might be expected, it is fairly common, even at the highest levels of formal education, for students to be ignorant of—or fail to use—the basic rules of citation, the documentary database search strategies specific to the discipline, or the necessary procedures for adequately organising documentary sources that are consulted in order to be able to extract information effectively whenever needed.

Of course, helping students to master these and other academic skills would require the teaching staff responsible for the various different subjects to co-ordinate in regard to the academic communication contents that need to be

taught during the course and the order in which they should be introduced. This coordination is also necessary for those acting as tutors and supervisors of projects and doctoral theses. However, such coordination is difficult to achieve, and frequently there is not explicit agreement on what should be demanded of students in relation to these contents.

PROCEDURES AND CANONS: THEORETICAL BASIS AND TEACHING PLAN

Our proposal is based on the premise that reading and writing are inseparable from the social practices in which they occur and from the particular purposes that define these practices (Carlino, 2005; Kozulin, 2000). Reading and writing constitute a set of competencies that are socially constructed through participation in different textual communities—such as the academic community—sharing specific texts and practising particular ways of reading, interpreting, and producing them. Moreover, scientific writing is not just a vehicle for communicating elaborated knowledge, but an indispensable element for generating such knowledge. Using reading and writing in an epistemic sense compels those doing so not only to read and write certain texts; it leads to writing, reading, and thinking in a particular way. For all these reasons, students in postgraduate education are faced with new demands as readers and writers for which they require competencies that cannot be generalised from their previous experience and need to be learned; mastering such competences requires students to actually reconstruct the tools of representation and communication, not merely to apply them.

By means of this subject we intend to help students to become competent in the epistemic use of written comprehension and composition tools, and to familiarise them with the canons of formal oral and written communication. In particular, the aims set for the subject are:

1. Knowledge and analysis of the characteristics, canons, and requirements of academic texts in the psychology domain.
2. Knowledge of the basic tools for finding, selecting, and organising information that are useful in carrying out scientific research and in academic communication.
3. Knowledge and analysis of the characteristics of the processes involved in writing academic texts in the psychology domain.
4. Evaluation of the influence of conceptions about and attitudes towards writing for academic purposes, from both the process and product standpoints.

The contents are structured around four core concepts:

a) The characteristics of academic and scientific texts
   - The requirements of academic texts in psychology
   - Description of the general norms and canons
   - Examples of the variety of academic texts
   - Analysis of and reflection on examples, rules, and conceptions of academic writing in psychology

b) The processes of academic writing
   - The process of composing academic texts
   - Frequent paradoxes in the production of an academic text
   - Writers' identities and profiles

c) Reading academic and scientific texts
   - Exploratory reading and elaborative reading
   - Strategies for consulting and organising documentary sources
   - Reading to produce academic texts

d) Public presentation of academic and scientific work
   - The relations between the requirements of the text itself, regulation of the written composition process and the necessary strategies for communicating in academic contexts
   - Oral academic communication: analysis of norms and conventions

Teaching of the contents described above is done in four face-to-face classroom sessions—eight hours in all—plus the directed study and work time stipulated in the subject —a further 20 hours. Students must attend all four classroom sessions and carry out the assignments that are set. One assignment, which is of a general nature and is performed in groups of two or three at the end of the course, consists in analysing and inferring the structure of a scientific article given to them in disordered fragments. This activity is designed to help students identify important characteristics of academic texts. The other tasks set are more specific and are performed individually. They are linked to the development of the core concepts listed above and involve reflecting on contents and the composition process itself. The aim of both the general task and the more specific tasks is to help students to consolidate and use the most important knowledge from the different core sections. These tasks also have an evaluative dimension, as they are used to assess and grade the students' work.

The specific tasks are done before each session. There follows a description of the tasks set for the core contents in the 2009/10 programme:

BLOCK 1. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ACADEMIC AND SCIENTIFIC TEXTS

Individual reading and production of texts to answer the following questions:

1. How many parts does each one contain?
2. How many linguistic operations? (definition, reformulation, explanation, summary, argumentation, comparison, contrast, description, enumeration, narrative, presentation of aims, presentation of procedures, presentation of instruments, etc.).
3. How many concepts? (conceptual vocabulary).
4. How many quotations?
5. Which connectors?

Working individually or in pairs, students are assigned two published scientific articles and asked to perform a textual analysis of them and describe their structure. For example, in the introduction section, they have to mark and label references to previous theoretical and/or empirical work, and also indicate whether a definition is given, and whether there are any descriptions, comparisons or contrasts. In the methodology and results section, they must underline the procedures, tasks and analyses carried out, the materials used and the instructions given, and whether any examples of tasks, productions, or behaviours are provided. They must also indicate the arguments and discussions in the Conclusions section. They are also required to categorise the citations in terms of integrated or non-integrated quotations, locate the connectors, and describe their semantic nature. Lastly, the students must indicate the key concepts and words in relation to the topic of the article. In order to perform this activity, they must read: El texto académico (*The academic text*, Chapter 1, by A. Teberosky in M. Castelló (2007). *Escribir y comunicarse en contextos académicos y científicos*. Barcelona: Graó, 17-46.

BLOCK 2. ACADEMIC WRITING PROCESSES

Individual reading and production of texts:
Assigned texts: Castelló, M. (2007). El proceso de composición de textos académicos [The process of composing academic texts]. In M. Castelló (Ed.), *Escribir y comunicarse en contextos académicos y científicos* (pp. 47-82). Barcelona: Graó.

Castelló, M. (2007). Los efectos de los afectos [The effects of affects]. In M. Castelló (Ed.), *Escribir y comunicarse en contextos académicos y científicos* (pp. 137-162). Barcelona: Graó.

The task involves various activities of different, though complementary, kinds, the aim of which is to promote reflection on the cognitive, affective, social and cultural nature of the process of written composition and relate this to the texts eventually produced. These activities are organised as follows:

a) After reading the set text, students write a brief summary of the research project they are carrying out—or will shortly be carrying out—in one of the modules on the master's degree (the practicum). These projects are usually done in the third semester and consist in a research project, in the case of the research itinerary, or an intervention project, in the case of the professionalising itinerary.

b) In order to have material for reflecting on the process, they must also keep a diary in which they make a note of the process they followed in writing the summary mentioned in the previous point. They are asked to record what happens to them (what they think, feel and do) from the time they start thinking about it until they consider the text finished. The instructions for this task instruct the students to do the following:

> Whenever you do any work on the summary, before finishing the work session, devote a few moments to making a note of everything you do (time spent, product achieved, steps taken, thoughts, feelings, expectations and your degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction).

In addition, the students are asked to fill in a questionnaire about their profile as writers containing items related to four factors: conception of the composition process, emotions associated with writing, procrastination and self-image as a writer.

c) During the face-to-face teaching session, the students form pairs and analyse the similarities and differences between their diaries—the process followed and the associated feelings—and their final texts. After this they discuss the different factors dealt with by the items in the questionnaire and examine how they are linked to the different writer profiles, so that each student can assess their answers in the light of this information. Lastly, taking into account their reflections in pairs and the guided discussion with the whole group, they review their fellow students' texts and offer any suggestions for improvement they consider appropriate.

d) Following the classroom session, the students revise their own texts, bearing in mind the suggestions for amendments they have received, and write a final reflection on what they learned about their profile as writers.

All the documents—diaries, reflections, initial and final text—are handed in. The assessment is based on the level of reflection attained on both the process employed and the impact of that process on the texts, the amendments suggested in pair work, the changes introduced into the final texts, and the degree of justification for these changes.

BLOCK 3. READING ACADEMIC AND SCIENTIFIC TEXTS

Individual reading and production of texts:
Miras, M., Solé, I. (2007) La elaboración del conocimiento científico y académico [The production of scientific and academic knowledge]. In M. Castelló (Ed.), *Escribir y comunicarse en contextos académicos y científicos* (pp. 83-111). Barcelona: Graó.

Working in pairs or individually, students are asked to reflect on exploratory reading and elaborative reading, comparing the information in the reference article with their own experience, so they can identify difficulties or problems they have when doing this type of reading. On the basis of this reflection, they write a short piece (no more than two pages, but it can be shorter) succinctly defining each of the two types of reading and setting out their difficulties with them, if they have any. In this piece, students must also answer the following question:

> What would you ask of your (research or intervention) project director in regard to these two types of reading?

The text produced by the students is handed in to the lecturer at the end of the classroom session.

BLOCK 4. PUBLIC PRESENTATION OF ACADEMIC AND SCIENTIFIC WORK

Individual reading and production of texts:
Solé, I. (2007) La exposición pública del texto académico: del texto para ser leído al texto oral [Public presentation of academic texts: from the text for reading to the oral text]. In M. Castelló (Ed.), *Escribir y comunicarse en contextos académicos y científico* (pp. 113-135). Barcelona: Graó.

In the reading material, the students identify the components of the public presentation of academic work that cause them greatest doubts or difficulties, and these then become the subject of discussion in the classroom session.

CONCLUSION: BALANCE SHEET AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The procedures and canons of scientific and academic communication was originally conceived as a workshop in which students and lecturers could further the competencies of the former by working together on the real problems posed by the production and dissemination—both oral and written—of academic

and scientific knowledge in the context of a university postgraduate course. The aim was to cater also to the specialised communication requirements in the professional psychology sphere. In addition, the subject acted as a preparation for certain tasks—such as presenting and defending a research project or an intervention experiment before a tribunal of teaching staff—thereby adding a clearly evaluative dimension.

In our experience we have found that students show interest in

- learning and acquiring knowledge about the characteristics of academic and scientific texts
- learning the most important features to be taken into account in the processes leading to understanding them and producing them
- identifying and putting into practice appropriate strategies for finding, organising, and citing documentary sources.

However, meeting more ambitious goals would require changes in the present structure. Because of the short time available (eight hours in class and 20 outside), we have had to downscale our original plans in regard to both the scope of our objectives and the methodology employed.

As far as the objectives are concerned, we have gradually been focusing more and more on scientific and academic competencies, while professional competencies have been squeezed out. This does not mean that students who opt for the professional profile cannot derive any benefit from the subject; in their active life they will all have to read scientific articles, organise documentary sources, and speak in public. However, to be honest, we must acknowledge that our efforts are aimed at helping the students understand academic and scientific texts and be able to present and provide arguments in support of their research projects in prototypical academic situations.

As regards methodology, we have not been able to give the subject the workshop flavour to the extent we would have liked. The disparity between the scope of the contents and the time available, on the one hand, together with the large number of students to be catered to, on the other, caused us to impose a structure more akin to a seminar. In general, therefore, the core contents are dealt with by the lecturer presenting the most important aspects in the various classroom sessions, augmented by a discussion of the compulsory reading articles, which the students have to prepare prior to each session. The more procedure-oriented dimension –which enables students to practise oral presentations and the reading and writing strategies—is confined to the specific tasks mentioned in the previous section.

As might be expected, the restrictions we have described prevent the subject from achieving its full, intended purpose. For the subject to be more successful, the following conditions would be required:

1. more time allocated to the subject, making it possible to cover the more procedure-oriented dimension
2. a general reformulation of the subject so that its specific contents are integrated into the reading, writing, and oral communication tasks students have to prepare in other subjects.
3. an extension of the subject—as part of the reformulation described in point b—with a workshop to support the writing of doctoral theses and other academic texts (for example, abstracts and papers to be presented in public at conferences or scientific forums).

Each of these solutions has its problems, but there is no doubt that the second—especially if it also involves the third—is the most complex. An examination of this option and the decisions that are eventually taken must be part of a wider revision of the postgraduate course curriculum. At all events, we hope the experience we have built up will enable the subject to be expanded and improved. In this way, it would be possible to achieve the purpose for which it was originally devised and meet the demands of the students, almost all of whom appreciate the knowledge they acquire from taking the subject. They, as do we, regret that there is very little follow-up and support for them in the demanding reading and writing processes involved in producing academic knowledge.

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