Academic Literacy Right from the Start?
A Critical Realist Study of the Way University Literacy is Constructed at a Gulf University

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to examine how university literacy is constructed at a university in the Arabian Gulf and to evaluate the appropriateness of this construction where students of a low level of English are exposed to academic English (Right from the Start). Unpacking this construction is a complex task and to gain even a limited insight into the numerous discourses, epistemologies and pedagogies constituting the construction of university literacy at Gulf universities, a stratified approach that probes the layers of ‘reality’ is necessary. Therefore, a critical realist approach is engaged, along with a variety of methods to probe the layers of the phenomenon.

In terms of thesis organization, the traditional empirical structure common to the Social Sciences and the argumentative structure common to the Humanities are integrated. While the information obtained by a variety of methods is analysed and conclusions are reached, this material is also used along with additional literature to support the central contention that university literacy and academic English are possible ‘right from the start’, if the students’ literacy is examined from a certain perspective and if there is an appropriate pedagogy which promotes the desired literacies. This combination of thesis structures would be deemed appropriate in the critical realist ontological framework since the rigour of the thesis lies both in its “reliability” resulting from the empirical data and its focus on the ‘real’; and its “reflexivity” and “persuasiveness” arising from the transparently ‘critical’ argument of the thesis (Cadman 2002). In order to conduct the empirical research, the lenses suggested by
each of the major views of literacy as outlined by Lea and Street (1998) - namely the “study skills” view, the narrow “academic socialization view” and the “academic literacies view” are utilized in succession. However, the central argument is revealed as the manifestations of each ‘view’ of literacy in the specific context are examined, the research outcomes obtained by utilizing each view in succession are outlined and both are critiqued from the perspective of the “academic literacies” view.

Corpus research is undertaken from a “study skills” perspective and the effect of the vocabulary taught to the students on their use of vocabulary in their writing is examined. Also, using the “study skills” lens, the students’ “global language development” in terms of changes or fluctuations in “fluency, accuracy and complexity” (Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki et al. 1998) over a period of at least three semesters is examined. Utilizing a narrow “academic socialization lens”, studies conducted at the University on learning strategies and motivation and the comments made by respondents in interviews and on an electronic discussion board are compared to comments made by teachers and lecturers.

Major flaws in these views of academic literacy are acknowledged and the way each view manifests itself in the Discourse(s) prevalent at this particular university is demonstrated. Finally, Discourses evidenced in the student interviews in particular, are unpacked and then compared and contrasted with those in the lecturer interviews as well as the curriculum and
other university documents. The limitations of the study are examined and suggestions for further research and ways to address 'problems' associated with university literacy are given.