Students’ Preparation for IELTS: Development of Written and Oral Argumentative Texts

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Abstract

This study is an investigation into opportunities provided for experiencing literacy in an IELTS Academic Version preparation course in Tehran. The purpose of this research project is to identify class tasks that generate opportunities for experiencing literacy and to describe aspects of the literacies that develop in the preparation course. The focus is on literacy practices for developing argumentative texts (written and oral).

Increasing numbers of students whose first language is not English seek to continue their education in English-medium universities, for example in Australia. They are required by different universities to sit for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to evidence their language proficiency. Based on the IELTS organizers, “Over 1.2 million candidates take the test each year to start their journeys into international education and employment” (http://www.ielts.org, viewed 25/05/2009). However, despite meeting the required IELTS band scores, a growing number of them face difficulties and may fail academic requirements. To address this problem this study aims to investigate and analyse classroom tasks. In particular it examines the development of argumentative texts (written and oral). In this ethnographic case study I taught and recorded an IELTS academic preparation class over a period of five months. The investigation was conducted in normal classroom settings where the candidates experienced written and oral argumentative tasks to prepare for the IELTS Academic Version examination. Classroom discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics were used to support the analysis and interpretations.

This study discusses the objectives of the preparation course and addresses the findings which indicated that participation in the IELTS academic course provided the candidates with opportunities to acquire to some extent the literacy for: (a) communicating appropriately with prompts and contentious topics in order to develop relevant written and oral argumentative texts, (b) observing argumentative genre conventions in organizing their texts, and (c) selecting appropriate linguistic resources, which made it possible to obtain their required band scores. But, based on the analyses the extent of these literacies does not show an appropriate level required for university study. There is no guarantee for or evidence of such candidates’ adaptation and adoption of English-medium academic culture. Further research in different contexts is required to provide more insights.
Declaration

NAME: SHARIF MOGHADDAM...............  PROGRAM: PhD.................................

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Accomplishment of a PhD program by no means may be thought of as a single person journey or as an easy one. The journey, as with every big project, requires collaboration and cooperation of several participants in order to be accomplished. So, in accomplishing my PhD program, I am indebted to many people for their support, sincere assistance, encouragement and patience. I acknowledge invaluable and unforgettable contribution of every person, group and institution that assisted me in this journey, but it is only the limited space here and the extent of the indebtedness that makes it difficult to account for every contribution. The list here, therefore, is by no means exhaustive.

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Transcription Conventions

a. Codes in transcription

P  Participant (if followed by a number it refers to a particular participant, e.g. P1)
Ps  Some of the participants
PS  All the participants
R/L  Researcher/Lecturer (The Researcher was also the Lecturer/Instructor.)

Bold  notes/narratives

Bold and italics  Commentaries

b. Transcription Symbols (based on Atkinson & Heritage, 1984)

(.) micropause, (.2 second)
(,.5) Pause of .5 second
    :  lengthened sound or syllable; more colons prolong the stretch
    -  cut-off, usually a glottal stop
    .hhh  inbreath
    .hhh!  strong inhalation
    hhh  exhalation
    hhh!  strong exhalation

hah, huh, heh, hnh  laughter; followed by (!) stronger laughter

(hhh) breathiness within a word
    .  falling intonation
    ?  rising intonation
    ,  continuing intonation
    ,?  rising intonation, weaker than (?)
    !  animated intonation
    =  latched utterance

[X]  overlapping talk

% X %  quiet talk
    * *  creaky voice
    ^  marked rising shift in pitch

<X>  talk slows down

tch  tongue click
underlining emphasis
→ feature of interest
(X) transcription doubt, uncertainty
((X)) nonvocal action, details of scene
Definition of the Key Terms

Text
In this dissertation text is viewed from a functional perspective in the words of Halliday and Hasan (1985) who say text is “language that is functional” (10). In this sense, language is regarded as a dynamic entity which does something in a context rather than language in the form of some words and sentences isolated from context and meaning. So, “any instance of living language that is playing some part in a context of situation” (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 10) is regarded as text. However, texts are considered as genres as well.

Genres
The term genre according to Halliday and Hasan (1985) is, in fact, “a short form for the more elaborated phrase ‘genre-specific semantic potential’” (p. 108). Genres, however, are defined as staged, goal oriented social processes. Genres are referred to as processes because members of a culture interact with each other to act upon them. They are goal oriented because they have evolved in order to get things done. Finally, they are staged because it usually takes more than one step for participants to achieve their goals (Martin, Christie & Rothery, 1994, p. 233).

Academic Genres/Genres of university study
Academic genres or genres of university study refer to activities, which require specific function and style such as genre-specific writing, for example an essay (exposition genre vs. discussion genre), report, literature review, project plan, thesis, summary (Coffin, 2004; Moore & Morton, 2005). Research articles and research theses are two examples of academic genres produced at advanced stages of individuals’ enculturation in disciplinary communities. They present original research that aims to persuade the academic community in accepting new knowledge claims, and are the result of social negotiations between authors and disciplinary gatekeepers (Koutsantouni, 2005, p. 19). In this study the term academic genres is used to refer to genres of university study.

1 APA Style-5th Edition (2009) has been used for the purpose of citation and referencing.
Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (developed in mid 20th century by M. A. K. Halliday based on the studies undertaken by pioneer scholars such as Firth (his teacher), 1968; Malinowski; 1923; the Prague School and Helmslev, 1943; Whorf, 1956) deals with context, meaning and wording in a unified way by modelling them in a system of choices that accounts for the meaning people make in using language. Function is used because people make these choices based on the functions for which they seek to use language. The most generalizable application of systemic linguistics is to understand the quality of texts: why a text means what it does, and why it is valued as it is (Halliday et al., 1985).

IRF

IRF (Initiation, Response, Follow-up) (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Swain, 1999) in its student Follow-up sense for student initiation, student Response, and student Follow-up in open circuit classroom conversations (without teacher involvement) has its roots in IRE (Initiation, Response, Evaluation). Whereas IRE is meant to be teacher initiation (typically a question), student response and teacher evaluation in a limit closed cycle (Edwards & Mercer, 1994; Mehan, 1979; Sunderland, 2001), IRF is viewed as student initiation (a bid or a question or announcement of an issue), teacher/student response, and teacher/student follow-up (comment, evaluation or counter argument) (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Swain, 1999). It is also more comprehensive than IRF in sense of Initiation, Response, Feedback (Hauser, 2006). The comprehensiveness is because “In language classroom where students perform dialogues and role-plays, and do pair and group work, the teacher-initiated IRF may even not be the predominant exchange” (Sunderland, 2001, p. 9).

Ethnography

Ethnography is the written description of the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretive practices characteristic of a particular group of people. Such a description is typically produced by prolonged and direct participation in the social life of a community and implies two apparently contradictory qualities: (a) an ability to step back and distance oneself from one’s own immediate, culturally biased reactions so to achieve an acceptable degree of “objectivity”, and (b) the propensity to achieve sufficient identification with or empathy for the members of the group in order to provide an insider’s perspective-what anthropologists call “the emic view” (Duranti, 2003, p. 85).
**Ethnographic research**

Ethnographic research is the study of an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a long period of time by collecting, primarily, observational data (Creswell, 2003, p. 14).

**Learning opportunities**

These opportunities refer to any activity that is likely to lead to an increase in language knowledge. Some examples of learning opportunities that could be mentioned are: negotiation of meaning in a discussion, or reading and deriving meaning from a print text, or examining a pattern in language usage, or receiving direct feedback on the use of language. Such opportunities are normally available in the classroom in varying qualities and quantities (cf. Crabbe, 2003). Negotiation, interaction and participation in classroom discourse can create learning opportunities in the L2 classroom (van Lier, 1988).

**Classroom discourse**

Classroom discourse refers to how a teacher and students engage in face-to-face interaction concerning lessons and engagement in literacy events. In a session the nature and features of the classroom discourse may vary. It can be of different genres. It can be silent (almost all teacher talk except for some occasional questions) or controlled (student group works under teacher’s supervision and provides occasional feedback) or active (almost all students interact except for some occasional queries and feedback). It can involve the use of semantics and/or semiotics and other forms of linguistic recourses in their language socialization (cf. Alpert, 1987; Brophy & Good, 1986; Cazden, 1986; Hicks, 1996; Vygotsky, 1987).

**Literacy**

Literacy is not a single unitary skill; rather it is a social practice which has many specific manifestations (Cairney, 2000). Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events, which are mediated by written texts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). According to Barton and Hamilton (1998) literacy events are linked into routine sequences which may be part of the formal procedures and expectations of social institutions like schools. They claim that, “Texts are a crucial part of literacy events and the study of literacy is partly a study of texts and how they are produced and used, and in many literacy events there is a mixture of written and spoken language” (p. 9). So, various institutions such as education ones counted as social institutions support and structure
literacy events in particular contexts. Furthermore, as Barton and Hamilton (1998) state, “literacies are coherent configurations of literacy practices; of these sets of practices are identifiable and named, as in academic literacy and they are associated with particular aspects of cultural life” (p. 11).

**Literacy practices**

Literacy practices are ways in which people regularly use, distribute, produce and access texts in order to interact with one another during or after reading or writing and to accomplish varied language tasks. They vary in terms of the ways in which people interact with print, their purposes for using print, their interpretation of it and the meaning it has for their lives (cf. Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Baynham, 1995; Darville, 2001; Orellana, 1995).

**Literacy events**

Literacy events are complex activities encompassing contexts of literacy practices involved in written and oral texts and their literate functions in addition to their social and cultural aspects (cf. Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Chi, 2001; Comber & Cormack, 1997).

**Academic literacy**

According to the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (2002) academic literacy can be defined as the reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking skills, dispositions, and habits of mind that students need for academic success. It includes the ability to critically read and interpret a wide range of texts, to write competently in scholarly genres, and to engage in, and contribute to sophisticated academic discussion.

**Washback/Backwash effect**

Washback/Backwash effect is a phenomenon which indicates that the expectations of a test as desired from its design direct the orientation of preparation context (cf. Cheng & Watanabe, 2004; Green, 2006).

**OTEFL students**

OTEFL is the abbreviation of Other Than English as First Language students, and it is a term that I developed when talking about people who may know two or more languages. It is evident that they have not been brought up with English as their first language (cf. NNS ‘Non-Native Speakers’ and LOTE ‘Languages Other Than English’).
Abbreviations

IELTS: International English Language Testing System
TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language
TOEIC: Test of English for International Communication
MELAB: Michigan English Language Assessment Battery
CPE: Certificate of Proficiency in English
FCE: First Certificate in English
IRF: Initiation, Response, Follow-up
SFL: Systemic Functional Linguistics
OTEFL: Other than English as First Language
APP: Appendix