

Negotiating writing: challenges of the first written assignment at a UK university

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Chapter 12

Negotiating writing

Challenges of the first written assignment at a UK university

Carol Bailey

In the beginning I was thinking a sentence in Greek and then I was trying to translate that in English. After writing a few essays, words started coming to my mind directly in English.

(Vasiliki)

This chapter draws on the reflections of non-native-English-speaking students (NNESs) concerning their first experience of writing extended essays at a post-1992 UK university.¹ I begin by outlining some aspects of academic writing the students identified as challenging: writing at length; finding sources; reading in a foreign language; selecting relevant information; structuring a text; using an appropriate style; checking for accuracy; and observing academic writing conventions. I then argue from a critical pedagogical viewpoint that, rather than seeing the writing of NNESs as a ‘problem’ to be ‘fixed’ by admissions policies and ‘support’ staff, higher education institutions (HEIs) should reconsider their assessment strategies in a more inclusive light. Finally I discuss some of the inherent tensions and contradictions in critical English for academic purposes (EAP) teaching.

The students

Most of the primary data in this chapter come from students following a three-month English language foundation course designed to bring them from an English level equivalent to IELTS 5.5² to university entrance level (in this case IELTS 6.0 equivalent or above). Between January 2005 and May 2009, the 311 students who took the course came from Cyprus (142), mainland China (84), India (17), Spain (17), Japan (9), Poland (8), Greece (5), Pakistan (4), Taiwan (4), Hong Kong (3), Iran (3), Cameroon (3), Saudi Arabia (2), Korea (2), Bulgaria (2), Kuwait (1), France (1), Turkey (1), Algeria (1), Ghana (1) and Albania (1). Broadly speaking the students from Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Hong Kong, Ghana and Albania had completed high school education and were preparing to enter Year 1 of a UK undergraduate degree. The rest had completed two to four years of higher education in their home country and were preparing to enter postgraduate courses or Years 2–3 of an undergraduate degree.

On two of their modules (study units) students completed scaffolded essay writing tasks (1,200–2,000 words) and were asked to reflect on the process afterwards.³ Naturally the content and language of their reflections were influenced by their English level, by what they had been taught on the course and by their consciousness that this was an assessed piece of work. Over the years several themes emerged as areas of challenge in academic writing. To illustrate these themes I have selected quotations from the reflective accounts: not on a numerical/quantitative basis but inasmuch as they appear to shed light on the issue in question. Where stated I have supplemented the reflections of the foundation students with voluntary comments from postgraduates on an advanced language and academic skills in-session module, collected ad hoc from emails and tutorial discussions. All quotations are used with permission and followed by an indication of the student's nationality and degree subject.

I felt it important to quote the students verbatim, including grammar and lexis 'mistakes'. It seemed only fair to let them speak for themselves, given the high degree of editorial control I had already exerted in identifying themes and selecting material from their work. Furthermore, the students' own words illustrate – far better than I can – not only their difficulties in writing but also their creativity in expressing themselves despite limited linguistic resources.

Given the small data set, it would be inadvisable to draw essentialist conclusions about national education systems on the basis of my students' comments. I have also tried to avoid generalizing from the UK academic writing purlieu to 'western' or 'Anglophone' contexts since I am told that academic writing practices in Western Europe, North America and Australia are markedly different from those of the UK. And of course, international students in the UK are not a homogeneous group. Not all the challenges described below are experienced by every international student, and most are experienced by first year home students too (Bailey and Pieterick 2008).

Writing at length

It may come as a surprise how few international students have experience of writing an extended essay prior to entering UK study. In many education systems the primary means of assessment is by end-of-course examination, comprising multiple choice and short essay questions. Even students who have completed an undergraduate dissertation in their mother tongue may have written no more than 400 words at a time in English. The process of researching, planning and writing a long essay (in a foreign language!) can therefore be daunting:

In India there is different system of teaching and exams in schools as well as colleges for example ready made notes are available and students need to learn by heart that notes and write in exam its very easy.

(Indian postgraduate: biotechnology)

The most dangerous part of this module that I hear is to write 1,200 words essay . . . The most difficult part on this assignment it was the amount of words because it was a long essay and it was my first time which I had to write such a long essay.

(Cypriot: mechanical engineering)

Finding and selecting sources

One of the first challenges of a research-based essay is finding source material. This may involve acquiring a range of new information literacy skills. Many of my Cypriot students had never been in a library before. Some Indian students had used closed-access libraries, where the borrower fills out a book request form but is not allowed to browse the shelves (Jordan 1997). One Cameroonian student on the course explained that during his HND studies all the materials had been provided by the teacher. Chinese universities have libraries and increasing access to e-resources, but from what I observed while teaching in HEIs across China in 1997–2005, there was typically one set textbook per study unit, and students were rarely required to search for extra material.

Learn center have abundant learning source for ours study. But I feel giddy when I entered into the complex learning center system sometimes.

(Chinese: ceramics)

Increasingly, resources are made digitally available. This can be problematic for students from areas with intermittent electricity supply, infrequent access to computers and limited Internet provision.

I studied Computing for three years in India, but never used a computer during my course. We had all our lessons in an IT lab but weren't allowed to touch the computers in case we damaged them. I had never used Google or any other search engine before coming here. Basic things like uploading my student photo during online enrolment took me ages to do.

(Indian postgraduate: computer science)

Selecting the most useful sources from a wide range of material may pose a challenge. As Smailes and Gannon-Leary point out (2008: 55), students who are used to working from a set textbook may lack practice in differentiating between core and peripheral material or assessing the reliability of a source.

Searching information is also a hard work, because when faced to the whole information from internet or books, I have to read and choose what I need. Most importantly, I had to judge if they are accuracy or objective and whether I could find the reference of them. So, in my opinion, finding information is the most difficult thing in writing.

(Chinese: business)

In a number of cases I observed students becoming frustrated because they could not find one source that ‘answered’ their essay question. For example, one business student had chosen to compare the tax system in China and the UK: ‘The big problem is I should change my research topic that can’t find the information in website or university article. It is only found the tax system in UK or China, not both the UK and China.’

In the following account, the student’s assiduous quest for sources is complicated by her imprecise use of search terms. Spelling or grammar mistakes and limited vocabulary range may be frequent stumbling blocks for NNES searching library and journal databases which, unlike Internet search engines, make no allowances for language and typing errors.

My essay topic was sale price in public holiday. It was about promotion. I tried to find information in the Internet. There were 53,900,000 for ‘sale price’ information in the Google, 822 search results in the BBC website. However, I couldn’t find anyone was useful for my topic. I changed to pay attention books. When I typed in ‘strategy marketing’, I found some books. However, most of books were already borrowed. I went to [a distant campus] to borrow four books about sales promotion. I used two days to read the books. I couldn’t find useful information for my essay. I felt despond. How could I do? Where could I find information to support my opinion? Deadline was near, I hadn’t written any letter. I felt I didn’t want to do it, and not idea in my mind. At the end I wanted to abandon this topic. But it was too late . . . Homework, a lot of homework, headache was coming.

(Chinese: accounting)

Reading in a foreign language

Once students have found relevant source material, they have to read it. This poses several challenges for non-native English speakers. One frequently mentioned is that of grappling with discipline-specific terminology:

Before I came here, I just learned some academic and general words, but I knew nothing about my subject words. Because of this reason I almost cannot understand the sentences . . . For example nugget the means is a small solid lump especially of gold. This word is very strange for me . . . There are a lot of strange words in jewellery design.

(Chinese: jewellery design)

A second problem for students with lower levels of English is understanding complex grammatical structures – which are unfortunately common in academic writing:

It got very long sentence to explain something which is the meaning in the business. For instance, ‘we shall also examine the main forms of business

enterprise and consider what the key financial objective of the business is likely to be.' I didn't understand at the first in English, so I translated it, used me long time. After I see. It is not really difficult, but I used the double times to read it.

(Chinese: business)

All students who mentioned reading as a challenge commented on how long it took them to understand a text, and expressed frustration that they were spending time decoding language that they would rather have spent on dealing with content. This is more of an issue for speakers of languages not cognate with English. 'If it takes an English speaker one hour to read a text in English, a French speaker will need two hours and a Chinese speaker four' (Chinese postgraduate: business; see also Jordan 1997: 50–2). Another issue is that students may need to acquire new reading strategies. The stereotype of the Asian student as 'rote learner' has been called into question (see for example Watkins *et al.* 1991), but it remains a fact that reading a set textbook from cover to cover – and in many cases memorizing it – is a primary stage in the learning process for students from many countries (Smailes and Gannon-Leary 2008: 55). This slow, almost meditative way of reading does not always work well in the UK when students are required to survey a range of material and pick out key points in a short time. 'Read English is not practised to the Chinese. I often like read every word on the every sentence, which very waste time in the exam' (Chinese: jewellery design).

Structuring a text

On the foundation course, we require students to submit an outline plan before beginning their first draft. For some of the Cypriot high-school leavers, this was a new experience: 'I am a person who prefers to write my ideas coming like brainstorm and not to prepare so much for my work.' Most students found the process beneficial – because it saved time at the draft stage – and easy, because they had done similar exercises in their previous education. Two Chinese students who were very creative in their reflective writing felt constrained by having to follow an 'academic' structure. Interestingly, despite their limited command of English they were both aware of the need to conform to a certain discourse in order to be accepted and succeed:

I didn't like to write academic article. It had their pattern. I couldn't change anything. It is boring to me, because it baffle my mind. However, I must to write. My subject study will need it.

(accounting)

Next, I think outline is the bone of an essay. If you don't want your essay is a monster, you will have to let your outline and essay structure is good enough (not a nonconventional type).

(computer aided product design)

Several postgraduates said they had received negative feedback about their essay structure from tutors on their other modules. One Indian law student was asked to rewrite an essay introduction 'to be more specific'. A Chinese education student said she lost marks for not being concise, including 'irrelevant' information and frequently quoting Chinese sages. A Syrian law student explained:

The Arabic method of writing an essay is extremely different from the English method of writing an essay, in the Arabic method we put general introduction about the title, and then in the body, which is the core of the essay, we talk about the title in one long paragraph, and then come the conclusion. While in the English method the introduction is very important because it contains a work plan, moreover it mention points about what the body will talk about, the body is very important too it contains paragraphs, each paragraph explain the points that was mentioned in the introduction, then come the conclusion.

(Syrian: law)

Cultural preferences regarding text organization are explored in the field of contrastive rhetoric (see for example Connor 2002). Such explorations can be very helpful to students, teachers and assessors of academic writing since they reveal potentially problematic differences such as those mentioned above. At the same time, care should be exercised to avoid making culturally essentialist assumptions about discourse patterns (Hyland 2006: 44) or upholding any one rhetorical model as superior to others (Kachru 1999).

Using an appropriate style

Linked to linguistic and cultural variations in academic discourse patterns are those of academic style. In some countries it is considered good practice to quote proverbs in a science assignment, or cite classical poets in an essay on business management. In the UK, as my Chinese Education postgraduate discovered, this is less acceptable.

Anglo-American academic style incorporates several features – complexity of sentence structure, formality (e.g. special academic register; avoidance of colloquialisms), objectivity and impersonality (e.g. passive voice, impersonal pronouns). The academic writer must be explicit yet at the same time (depending on the discipline) cautious, supporting every assertion with evidence, reasons and reference to work by recognized scholars (Swales and Feak 2004). Any breach of these conventions is punished by the academy's gatekeepers: journal editors, reviewers, university lecturers. This can be demoralizing for mature postgraduates, who may have a wealth of ideas, knowledge and personal experience (Ryan and Viète 2009) but will not be 'heard' unless they can find an acceptable means of expression (Canagarajah 2001: 129).

It was not formal because it is not an academic writing. It just like I was talking to somebody. So I need to correct it.

(Chinese: business)

Beside the grammar, the style is also a difficult part of my writing. The transition from informal to formal, from active to passive form, all this things seemed to be impossible.

(Bulgarian: business)

The question of appropriate style is complicated further (for native English speakers too) by the fact that many students are enrolled on mixed-discipline courses – for example public health, commercial law, social work – which require multiple genres and sometimes disparate reference systems (Schmitt 2005).

Checking for accuracy

As well as style, the need for grammatical accuracy may cause concern to NNEs – sometimes with good cause:

The composition of academic sentences was not easy as it was confusing me with the structuring sentences on my home language, what was as result non-understandable and sometime without making sense writing in English.

(Cypriot: automotive engineering)

However, often students worry unnecessarily about grammar – many lecturers (depending to an extent on the academic discipline) are prepared to ‘peer through’ the language mistakes (HEA 2010) to focus on content and argumentation (Jordan 1997: 46–8).

Writing is the worst part of the English language for me. I always had problems with vocabulary, punctuation and grammar. I never learnt how to write essays or any writing in English language . . . When I hand in my essay I was afraid and proud. I was really surprised when I saw my feedback . . . Although I made thousands of grammar and punctuation mistakes my essay wasn't so bad.

(Polish: biological science)

Academic writing conventions

One cause of major anxiety for students facing written assignments is the requirement to observe academic writing conventions and ‘avoid plagiarism’. Some express this as a relatively new concept:

Plagiarism is a very serious problem in West, especially in the University. We have to study how to avoid plagiarism. In fact, plagiarism is not a serious

problem in China, because China is a developing country. Pirate is very popular in China, such as books, music and movie. So, most people haven't concept of plagiarism. I always copy information on Internet and books without reference when I study in China.

(Chinese: business)

In contrast, Liu (2005) contests the assertion that copying others' writing is acceptable in China, citing his own educational experience, eighth-century Chinese scholars and twentieth-century Chinese composition textbooks as evidence that the concept of plagiarism has long been understood. Likewise Phan Le Ha (2006) takes issue with the notion that plagiarism arises from cultural conditioning, arguing that Vietnamese students are well aware of the concept but that referencing practices differ. Certainly the mechanics of referencing posed problems for some of my students:

The strict Harvard style reference really made me woopy. I also did it in my country, but it not so strict that a punctuation must be correct.

(Chinese: business)

Sometime, I found source on the Internet, but I can not very easy to found the article publishing date and page, it is difficult to write the reference . . . I very worry about this, because I should write academic essay when I have degree course.

(Chinese: ceramics)

Errey (2002) found that international students – contrary to their teachers' expectations – were less uncertain about the concept of intellectual ownership and the mechanics of citation than how to incorporate others' words into their own text. Writing an academic essay is an incredibly complex task. The weaving together of others' voices with one's own to create a coherent written text is challenging for native speakers and even more so for those with an incomplete grasp of the language (Schmitt 2005). One Indian business student explained that in her previous MBA studies, 'if I needed to write an essay just I used to copy and paste the whole assignment [while] modifying the certain part of my essay'. The texts she had produced for her foundation course essays were precise and coherent patchworks of other writers' words. She had read quite widely and had cited all her sources – i.e. she was not intending to cheat (Pecorari 2003). However, she was not versed in the habits of paraphrasing, quoting and stating her own position.

Paraphrasing is especially difficult for NNEs as it requires the writer to manipulate grammatical structures as well as identifying suitable synonyms. Keck (2006: 272), comparing paraphrases by native- and NNEs, found that the latter group 'used significantly more Near Copies' (i.e. textual borrowing) than their native-English-speaking peers.

For me the biggest problem was paraphrasing original tekst because my essay was about DNA and it was very hard to change vocabulary or grammar. I could not change vocabulary because it was specialist and specyfic and teksts or articles are written by author in passive so it was the most difficult point of my essay.

(Polish: biotechnology)

Several students commented on the amount of time they spent on trying to paraphrase:

I don't know how to write and I should change the sentences structure or words so that make sure no plagiarism. After three hours, I only write nearly 100 words. I worried about if I can finish my assignment on time.

(Chinese: business)

Paraphrasing someone's words was the most difficult part in the assignment, as I need to find different synonyms for some words and make sure how to use them. Another problem was facing me in my writing that I could not speed up; I spent long hours writing my essays due to limited vocabularies that I have.

(Saudi Arabian: mathematics)

Pressure of time, as well as limited linguistic resources, may lead students (inadvertently or otherwise) to commit plagiarism. (For a comprehensive discussion on writing from sources and the linguistic aspects of plagiarism, see Pecorari 2008.)

Discussion

If international students experience certain aspects of academic writing as particularly difficult, why do we insist on them? Is transformation through paraphrase the only way to demonstrate understanding of a text? Is a literature review the best way to demonstrate knowledge of a field? Why do we ask undergraduates to mimic the style of scholarly publication when so few of them plan a career in the academy?

All too often when faced with 'poor' writing by international students, academic staff argue that English language entry criteria should be raised. While this may help, as a solution it does not fully acknowledge the complexity of the issue. First, even students from countries such as India or Nigeria, where English is widely spoken and a medium of instruction, may be unfamiliar with writing at length, information literacy, UK style requirements and academic writing conventions. Second, while English language tests may provide a useful indication of students' linguistic competence, they do not necessarily predict success in academic writing. For example, in the IELTS test there is no link between the reading and writing

papers. The first writing task (150 words) requires candidates to describe a visual prompt but not to explain or interpret it. Task 2 (250 words) requires candidates to draw on their own ideas and experience in an opinion-based essay type not commonly found in higher education. The length and nature of the tasks and lack of integration with the reading passages mean that a candidate may score highly on the IELTS writing test yet underperform on a 3,000-word literature-based university essay.

Another commonly proposed solution to the ‘problem’ of unsuccessful writing by international students is EAP and/or academic skills tuition, both before and during degree study. This can undoubtedly benefit students’ academic writing, all the more so when it is embedded in the curriculum and not stigmatized as an optional ‘remedial’ or ‘support’ add-on. However, I would argue that institutions (while not neglecting academic language/literacy provision) need to move beyond an assimilation/acculturation focus on inducting international students into the locally dominant academy. Following Benesch (1993), Scollon (1994), Pennycook (1996) and Kachru (1999), I suggest that educators should adopt a more open and self-critical approach to ‘foreign’ rhetorical conventions. In 2008/9, international students formed 68 per cent of the full-time population on taught postgraduate courses in the UK (UKCISA 2011; based on data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency). Given such an international context, how can one justify clinging to assessment practices designed primarily with home students in mind?

One argument for preserving the status quo is that people choose to study overseas because they seek experience they could not obtain in their own country. For example, Egege and Kutulieh (2008: 74–5) contend that ‘transnational/international students enrol in Western degrees because they see them as transformative’, desiring to explore ‘new ways of being and doing’. Undoubtedly many students do appreciate the transformative aspects of overseas education. According to one Indian computer science postgraduate, ‘Education is more practical here – I’m learning how to *do* things, not just write about them.’

In China, if I don’t understand something, the teacher will tell me the answer. It’s more convenient . . . but in Britain the teachers force you to study yourself, to work things out on your own. This way you can get more experience, learn how to do things for yourself.

(Chinese postgraduate: business)

However, not everyone studies overseas because they intrinsically value the education system of their host country. They may be studying abroad because the demand for higher education in their home country exceeds supply, or because they believe an overseas qualification may make them more employable, or because they hope to migrate to the country in question. And even a student whose motivation for study is transformative may feel daunted when faced, early in their course, with a 4,000–5,000 word assignment requiring them to discuss an unfamiliar topic critically.

A second frequently voiced argument against revising assessment strategies in consideration of international students is that this might involve ‘lowering’ or ‘dumbing-down’ standards. I believe that this need not be the case, and that UK law and government policy actively endorses more inclusive assessment practices. Although UK HEIs set their own assessments and validate their own programmes, since 2003 they have been required to align their awards and qualifications to the national Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) (QAA 2008), which provides a series of reference points (learning outcomes) for different levels of study. In addition, many degree programmes have to demonstrate adherence to professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements. The precepts and outline guidance set out in the FHEQ aspire to ‘accommodate diversity and innovation’. Awarding institutions are exhorted to consider ‘whether the design of the curriculum and assessments is such that *all students following the programme have the opportunity to achieve and demonstrate the intended outcomes*’ (QAA 2008: 12; *my italics*).

A persuasive case for inclusive assessment is made in the context of disability legislation. UK law now requires institutions to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to assessments, in order to ‘enable disabled students to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes’ (QAA 2010: 8). There is no requirement to alter the learning outcomes, or the ‘competence standards’ that may be set by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. There is, however, an expectation that assessment methods be flexible and that ‘there may be more than one way of a student demonstrating that they have achieved a particular outcome’ (*ibid.*). Moreover, institutions have an ‘anticipatory duty’, when designing programmes, to consider how assessment methods and strategies might disadvantage disabled students, and to propose alternatives. Waterfield and West (2006: section 3) are critical of the way these requirements are implemented by the majority of UK institutions, suggesting that it is limited and assimilationist. They argue for an ‘inclusive approach’ whereby flexible assessment methods ‘capable of assessing the same learning outcomes in different ways’ be made available for all, to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

In referring to disability legislation I am not suggesting that being an international student (possibly with an imperfect command of English) is equivalent to having a disability, defined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 as ‘a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [one’s] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ (section 1). One may assume that, over time, international students can adapt to their new academic culture and improve their communication skills. I cite the disability legislation as a useful (and, in the UK, legally enforceable) precedent for varying assessment practices while keeping academic standards intact. Moreover, there is a nascent synergy between the equal opportunities and internationalization agendas (Eade and Peacock 2009). Both aspire to foster respect for others and promote inclusive approaches to education, not least in the context of assessment.

If our assessment continues to be based upon a Western template of knowledge that values Western ways of knowing and learning, all our lip service to developing interculturally competent students is meaningless. It also institutionalises discrimination against students from non-dominant backgrounds and privileges students from dominant groups.

(MacKinnon and Manathunga 2003: 132)

When students from particular cultural contexts consistently experience problems with assessment, we need to consider the role that culturally based factors may be playing and respond to these appropriately. This calls for an awareness of and respect for other assessment cultures and a realisation that our local culture is not the only one, nor necessarily the best.

(Brown and Joughin 2007: 70)

There is some evidence that certain assessment types do disadvantage certain groups of international students. For example, NNESs may under-perform in time-constrained written examinations due to lack of fluency and accuracy when writing (De Vita 2002: 221). Equally, they may under-perform in multiple choice tests that require a certain reading speed and the ability to differentiate between apparently similar lexical items (Dolan and Macias 2009: 27). I am not suggesting that institutions dispense with exams because some NNESs find them hard (though it would be interesting to consider why NNESs are not offered extra time and laptop use as dyslexic students are). There needs to be 'a balanced diet of different means of assessment within a course . . . to ensure that no particular group is favoured over any other group' (Race *et al.* 2005: 3).

The question, then, is not: should we change our learning outcomes to make assessments more achievable for international students?, but: how creative can we be in designing ways of demonstrating these outcomes that are meaningful, valid and give all students a fair chance of success? Institutions also need to consider to what extent lecturers, when marking work, can accept 'bad English' and different rhetorical approaches, or exercise leniency regarding patchwriting and unskilled referencing.

The past two decades have heralded a wealth of scholarship and innovation in higher education assessment design, driven by various factors including a desire for greater authenticity; making the assignments more engaging; designing out opportunities for plagiarism; dealing with large cohorts; cutting costs; responding to the widening participation agenda; improving student retention; developing transferable skills; and enhancing employability. However, an innovatively designed assessment may pose its own challenge to international students, particularly where use of unfamiliar genres is required. For example, the assessment tasks suggested by Brown *et al.* (1994: 20) as alternatives to academic essays include a letter to an MP, a magazine article and a committee briefing paper. Each of these has its own discourse requirements that are different from those of an academic essay, and may be very different from those of a similar text in the

student's home country (journalese varies widely from country to country, as does the style of formal letters). The alternative task – designed to offer more authenticity and transferability – may burden international students with the need to master yet another discourse type (Brown and Joughin 2007: 69). Where non-standard assessments are used, it is imperative to provide explicit guidelines and models of the aims, format and assessment criteria (Waterfield and West 2006: inclusive assessment case study 6).

Conclusion

I have outlined some of the aspects of academic writing that international students may find difficult when newly arrived in the UK. In drawing on my students' written reflections and oral comments, I have selected observations about areas of challenge and left out remarks such as 'the teachers are very kind', and 'I have learned so much from this course'. My aim in focusing on the difficulties of academic writing is not to present a deficit view of international students as needing 'support', but to provide an overview of some of the issues HE providers should bear in mind when designing and validating courses. With governments decreasing state funding for higher education, institutions are increasingly looking to maximize their revenue from external sources, including international student tuition fees. As international students form an ever-growing proportion of the student population in our institutions, we can no longer expect them to 'fit in' with a system designed primarily for a home-grown student body. Moreover, it is now widely recognized that innovations made on behalf of international students will commonly benefit all (Ryan and Carroll 2005).

In my discussion of assessment practices in UK HEIs I have tried to take a critical pedagogical stance, epitomized by Pennycook (1994: 297) as 'education grounded in a desire for social change'. I hold with Pennycook that the rhetorical conventions that currently predominate in my academic sphere are not a 'canonical truth to be handed on to our students' but 'something to be negotiated, challenged and appropriated' (*ibid.*: 299). The possibility that certain types of assessment disadvantage certain groups of international students is an equal opportunities issue that has to be addressed.

At the same time, critical EAP pedagogy carries an inherent tension between the 'utopian vision' of education reform and the 'pragmatic realities' of our institutions and classrooms (Benesch 2001: 141). One such reality is that very few EAP teachers have any influence over assessment strategies in their institutions. Increasingly, HEIs are employing EAP professionals not on academic contracts but on academic-related or administrative scales, and/or on part-time, short-term contracts. EAP provision is often located in 'units' or 'centres' which report to student support departments and are isolated from mainstream academic provision and curriculum reviews.

A second 'pragmatic reality' and locus of tension is that no matter how EAP teachers may question the validity of local assessment practices or academic writing

conventions, our students have the right to expect our assistance in mastering these so that they can succeed in their studies (Benesch 2001: 137). 'Ignoring the dominant conventions puts one in danger of losing the intended audience' (Canagarajah 2001: 129). We may hope for our students that they can challenge and transcend the 'rules', but in order to do so they must first understand them.

A third tension inherent in critical EAP pedagogy is the compelling necessity, while challenging political and cultural assumptions that underpin our education systems, to avoid portraying NNEs as defenceless victims incapable of learning, adapting or themselves critiquing different writing styles. Pennycook, discussing language use in the former British colonies, describes how English has been 'appropriated for different ends' such as political resistance, personal empowerment and liberation (1994: 260–87). Canagarajah (2001: 117) shows how 'language-minority students' from 'periphery English' communities (i.e. former colonies) 'negotiate a place for their local discourse conventions, intellectual traditions, cultural practices and the vernacular'. This 'negotiation for expression' fuels criticism and creativity in writing and gives rise to richly 'multivocal texts' (ibid.: 129).

In arguing that HEIs should reconsider their assessment strategies, I have moved away from my primary data: my students' voices. Despite frequent requests for 'less homework' and 'more fun' activities in class, none of them actually suggested that we alter the assessments. Instead, several described the huge sense of achievement and agency they experienced, having overcome the challenges of their first written assignments in the UK.

During the time I spent in doing the [assignments] I have experienced different feelings. However, when I finished my tasks the feeling was only one, satisfaction . . . Every beginning is hard, especially for us foreigners . . . these tasks were the most difficult but they make me feel confident that I can manage with all the tasks which will be given to me in the future.

(Bulgarian: law)

After of my essay I feel excellent with myself because an essay 1,200 words was difficult target for me. But then when I finished my essay I thought that nothing is difficult, you have to just believe yourself.

(Cypriot: mechanical engineering)

I would like to end as I began, with the words of Vasiliki,⁴ a Greek student who progressed from the language foundation course to a three-year degree in English language and linguistics. Vasiliki found writing difficult, and was diagnosed with dyslexia part way through her degree studies. Despite this and the added challenge of being a non-native English speaker, she graduated with a sound 2.1 degree, including an A for her honours dissertation.

When I look back at all the assignments I've done since I came to the UK ... it's a huge pile ... I wonder how I ever managed to write so many thousands of words. And when I reread my essays, even the ones I wrote in my first year, I think: 'Did I write that? It's really good!'

Notes

- 1 'Post-1992' indicates former polytechnics and colleges of higher education that became universities following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.
- 2 The International English Language Testing System is widely accepted as evidence of English language competence by HEIs in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and Ireland.
- 3 The task description was as follows: 'Describe your feelings about the academic writing process we have been going through in the past ten weeks (choosing a topic, finding information, writing an essay outline, taking notes, drafting and redrafting the essay). Were you surprised by the feedback on your first draft? What did you find difficult/easy about the assignment, how much time did you spend, and what do you need to improve about your writing skills? You should write 250 words.'
- 4 Name used with permission.

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