Written Registers of Undergraduate English: A Case Study of Intra-Departmental Variation

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My research centers on investigating functional varieties of English and the language of writing, interests that have developed out my experiences as a teacher. Teaching English in different contexts stoked my interest in functional language varieties: the English of my adult English as a second language (ESL) classes was fascinatingly different from that my English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. Both contexts were quite different from the language I taught for university-associated intensive English programs. A personal interest in writing due to the unique array of challenges it presents to language users, along with the centrality of both writing (Nesi & Gardner, 2012) and control of varieties (Biber & Conrad, 2009) for academic success have made this a natural focus for my interest in variation. I was able to merge these two areas of interest during my PhD-level studies when I began teaching English 105, the mandatory introductory writing course for all first-year university students. In a single week of teaching, students would produce several remarkably distinct varieties of language: an elaborated, verb-heavy, personal style for in-class writings; a reduced, conversation-like language for online posts and emails; and anything from noun-dense, informational text to heavily clausal, opinion-focused language depending on what an assignment asked of them.

During my teaching experience, I was exposed to two tools for understanding such a phenomenon. First, Corpus Linguistics, a method for identifying the characterizing linguistic features of a variety of language by building and investigating a principled representation of that variety (a collection of texts, or corpus) (Biber, 1993). Second, Register Analysis, a method for identifying text-varieties (registers) of the same language by studying production circumstances and communicative purposes of a particular type of language use, observing the linguistic features that characterizes that use, and then analyzing how the features observed are utilized to satisfy the communicative purposes and circumstantial parameters identified at the outset (Biber & Conrad, 2009). A final tool for the study revealed itself in the construction methods of the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus (Nesi & Gardner, 2012), which I studied for a related investigation. Linguistic analysis of the corpus was transparent thanks to principled collection methods and, most importantly, a sophisticated investigation of the educational context in which the language was produced, methods I sought to replicate.

My research project is a taxonomy of the written registers of my university's English department and analysis of linguistic and situational characteristics of these registers. The following research questions guided the project: 1) What are the registers of the written assignments found across undergraduate coursework in the English department? 2) What situational and linguistic features characterize these registers? 3) What do these registers reveal about coherence and variation in writing in the English department? These questions were answered through an investigation of the contextual characteristics of writing assignments and the language that students produced for the same assignments.

The contextual investigation began with the analysis of a collection of syllabi and curricular documents representing all courses taught in the department. In order to identify all written registers in the department, I matched assignment information from the syllabi with the characterizing situational factors of communicative purpose, topic, audience, and level of revision of assignments (factors

indicated in Conrad & Biber, 2009 and Nesi & Gardner 2012), though these were later expanded. This analysis produced an initial set of written registers of the English department, which I then discussed with two experts from each of the seven subdepartments of English. Writing was investigated by subdepartment to illuminate the intra-departmental differences. These discussions of the educational goals of writing assignments and the nature of coursework in each subdepartment provided important contextual information that helped to increase the accuracy of the description of registers identified, ensure that distinct registers reflected these real-world contextual distinctions, and identify a set of features characterizing register differences.

While the contextual analysis could exhaustively cover department registers, the linguistic analysis depended on a representative corpus, requiring both large-scale and precisely targeted collection. Based on the BAWE-construction methods, online collection was used to facilitate participation for students while ensuring data safeguards: interested students emailed me and received in response a secure, IRB-approved link to a university Dropbox account created for the project. The students then uploaded their consent form, questionnaire on demographics and the courses the writing was produced in, and any writing they wished to share. I publicized the project through in-person visits to classrooms, contacting students through listservs (with department agreement), and placing flyers. Large-section classes and mandatory junior-level writing courses were prioritized to ensure collection of the most commonly written registers in the most commonly taken courses identified in the contextual analysis. The resulting corpus represents the most common registers of the department (several Analysis registers), in contrast to the contextual investigation's exhaustive coverage of registers. The linguistic analyses performed were a multidimensional analysis (Biber, 1988), statistical identification of co-occurring linguistic features with a qualitative interpretation of communicative functions driving their co-occurrence, and an analysis of complexity features—noun-phrase versus clausal grammatical features (Biber, Gray, & Poonpon, 2011)—in the student writing.

Findings from the contextual investigation revealed a wide range of frequently assigned registers found across the different areas and levels of the department. An analysis of patterns of both frequency and qualitative variation of registers (based on subdepartment and year of study) illustrated connections between particular registers and the educational aims of subdepartment coursework. For the department overall, these registers reflect the importance of developing analytical argumentation (Text Analysis, Short Text-Analysis, sometimes Reading Response), metadiscoursal (Reflection, Portfolio Cover Letter), revision (Portfolio, Peer Feedback), and specialized writing skills (Writing Exercise). Other most common registers revealed further departmental emphasis on extended writing projects (Proposal) and content mastery (Reading Response and In-Class Assessment), though these registers were more likely to vary in frequency and qualitative characteristics depending the educational aims of the course and subdepartment in which they were found.

Investigation of the nature of the most frequent registers and across levels of individual subdepartments revealed often distinct pedagogical priorities expressed through written assignments. The most common registers in just two subdepartments indicate some of this variation. Text Analysis was most common in the Literature subdepartment, which had the largest range of registers among subdepartments, indicating frequent and varied writing tasks. In the Creative Writing subdepartment, Peer Feedback, Portfolio, and Portfolio Cover Letter were most common among a smaller overall number of registers due to the narrower focus on peer-facing written communication and developing and presenting a body of written work. Investigating register patterns by level revealed differences across years of study. In the first year, a narrow range of registers focusing on developing core capabilities (analysis and content-mastery) were prevalent amongst a smaller number of general coursework offerings. In the final year of undergraduate study, the three most common patterns were

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registers of extended, revised, research-based writing, registers of meta-discoursal reflection, and registers resembling technical writing produced in non-academic, workplace settings.

In an attempt to identify universal trends amidst this substantial variation, findings were synthesized with previous studies (Melzer, 2009; Nesi & Gardner, 2012; Römer & O'Donnell, 2011; Wolfe, 2011) to identify clusters of registers found across studies (Argumentation, Informative, Evaluation, and Demonstrating Knowledge) that potentially indicate core functions of writing across the university, as well as those particular to this study (Correspondence) and perhaps to English-department writing. Because the corpus I constructed only represents Analysis registers, the linguistic investigation reveals less about overall variation within the department, and has therefore been given less focus here. However, Analysis registers alone did contain illustrative patterns of linguistic variation. For example, the multidimensional analysis revealed the use of linguistic features for attributing positions to others (third person pronouns, private verbs, stance *that* verb complement clauses, *that* deletion, and indefinite pronouns) contrasted with those for reporting dense information (pre-modifying nouns, attributive adjectives, total nouns, and common nouns). Features for attributing positions to others were prevalent in the Short Analysis register and in Creative Writing and Literature departments, whereas features used to report dense information were prevalent in the Research-Analysis register and in Technical Writing and Linguistics departments, both suggesting that contextual differences between even similar assignments result in the production of different language by students.

Two main implications from the study are indicated as fertile directions for research. First, variation. Evidently, writing, even at the undergraduate level in non-specialized coursework, is composed of a wide range of assigned registers that often differ substantially. This variation occurs within the types of assignments immediately recognizable as 'university writing' (e.g., a text-analysis or annotated bibliography) but also includes a wider-array of writing than may be given explicit instruction in English-language pre-university coursework (e.g., writing for a non-university audience, providing written feedback to peers, directing out-of-class written discussions on online course forums, and corresponding with others via email). As a result, instructors should seek to prepare students for this variation by exposing them to authentic samples of writing from these different areas and drawing explicit attention to the functions of these texts (and even among different sections of a single text) and how the particular grammar and vocabulary are suited to effectively perform specific communicative functions. While it is impossible to teach each specific text-type each student will encounter, it is possible to help students develop writing awareness using the universally identifying features of assignments (according to this project: purpose, audience, personal nature, object of study, coherence, revision, time, research, and medium). In this manner, students can self-identify the primary communicative tasks of their assignments and consciously produce the most fitting language and writing approach for the assignment at hand.

Second, context sensitivity. Investigations that cover what students are assigned or the writing they produce are both more feasible and more illuminating when carried out in a department or even subdepartment that the researcher is familiar with. This project's methods and findings, for example, were enhanced at every step by focusing on understanding a local context through active collaboration. While research must be principled and systematic, questions, methods, and even analyses are improved by developing interest in and connections with the challenges, questions, and voices of a local context. The institutional analysis I performed within my local department was conducted using methods available to anyone willing to develop a healthy relationship with and curiosity for their own teaching context: collecting materials used in practice, investigating the language students produce, talking to teachers about instructional decisions, and following the questions this contextual investigation leads to with principled analysis.

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