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A Close Investigation into Authenticity in Academic Read-To-Write Integrated Tasks

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Abstract: *This academic essay is an assessed coursework in Teaching English in Professional and Academic settings (TEPAS) for taught postgraduate in School of Languages, Linguistics, Queen Mary University of London (2018). In English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings, teaching reading and writing in integration is considered to encourage 'authenticity'. To discuss above statements in a critical way, this essay first introduces the notion of discourse communities in EAP settings, illustrates the literacy support of the source texts in order to exemplify the advantages of integrated tasks. Then, the essay puts integrated task authenticity under detailed analysis by taking students' literacy needs and communication features in academic and professional settings into consideration.*

Keywords: *EAP, ESP, Reading-Writing Integrated Task, Task Authenticity*

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that successful academic writing is inextricable from reading process, as writing is rarely composed in isolation but rather it is always a response to texts or opinions of others (Chan, Inoue, & Taylor, 2015), thus, teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) readingand writing in integration 'encourages authenticity' by simulating a replication of real-world reading-to-writing practices (Plakans & Gebril, 2012). It has been considered to contain positive influences on task authenticity, however, the expected authenticity can be impacted by several factors such as the diversification of disciplinary requirements and the variety of student's educational levels, which brings necessity to take the discourse communities into consideration in task design procedure.

To discuss above statements in a critical way, this essay first introduces the notion ofdiscourse communities in EAP settings, illustrates the literacy support of the sourcetexts in order to exemplify the advantages of integrated tasks. Then, the essay putsintegrated task authenticity under detailed analysis by taking students' literacy needsand communication features in academic and professional settings into consideration.

2. Literature review

The connection between reading and writing tasks in Higher Education (HE) has been widely accepted by many scholars and researchers. According to Esmaeili (2002), reading and writing are not 'stand-alone skills' (pp.615). Indeed, they are usually considered as (Grabe & Zhang, 2013), and are taught in integration in pedagogic contexts due to the inner interaction. Watanabe (2001) pointed out that student's writing performances can be a strong predictor of the reading-to-write task results. Students who have a better performance on integrated tasks appears to be morecapable of completing writing tasks successfully. Similarly, Plakans &Gebril (2012) also discovered the significant correlation between reading and integrated tasks by comparing writer's text comprehension abilities with their academic writing score levels. As higher score writers may have had an advantage of understanding the topic more thoroughly, they concluded that reading comprehension can be a powerful indicator of writers' academic writing performances.

In integrated tasks, reading and writing are two linear stages with different functions and elements. Widdowson (1984) defined the reading task as receptive, in which the transmission of information lies in the central. Students could gain three elements from reading process: the text which is being read,

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the background knowledge, and the contextual aspects related to text interpretation, such as the surrounding text and environment.(Royer, Bates, & Konold, 1984). While in writing tasks, writers are required to 'summarize information, take notes, or write short, critiques, or longer research papers'(Shelyakina, 2010, p. 16), and eventually integrate the materials into the written response.

The overall function of integrated tasks in academic writing contexts has been widely recognized. Weigle (2004) concluded three stages in 'reading-into-writing/ tasks': identifying and evaluating source texts; selecting relevant information from the sources; applying the information in the argument. The two tasks are seen as work together to help writers preform well in integrated tasks. In Plakan's research (2008), students in integrated tasks outperformed the traditional task groups, as the reading materials provide writers with topical content and logical argument. The literacysupport provided by reading texts helps them to gain ideas from the topic and save much time in the stage of planning-before-writing.

Indeed, the benefits of teaching EAP/ESP reading and writing in integration in academic settings have been claimed by many researchers. One noticeable advantageis that the authentic reading materials from the reading-to-write pedagogical model could encourage authenticity in writing tasks. Phillips (1981, pp.35) put forwardseveral methodological principles and explained the importance of authentic materials in EAP settings: Materials that are 'genuine, authentic, real, natural, scripted, semi-authentic, semi-scripted, simulated, simulated-authentic…' are preferred in the teaching process. In this way, students acquire authentic language data from thesource texts and apply these materials to satisfy writing purposes in the context of composition.

However, the expected function of integrated tasks seems unlikely to achieve in real-world practices. The variety of disciplinary requirements brings disciplinary silos,which may impede the expected authenticity. Wingate (2012) refers to the 'silo effect' as 'cross-fertilization between models and segregation of target groups for literacyinstruction.' (pp. 12). Nesi & Gardner (2012) pointed out that disciplinary groups such as Humanities, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Social Sciences tend to assess student's essay writing. However, the writing purposes in these different academic fields are different. It requires learners to recognize the connection between reading and writing tasks in EAP instruction. Otherwise, they may solely focus knowledge needed in one specific discipline without connecting with other disciplines or academic abilities.

The disciplinary differences also bring theoretical varieties to discourse communities,a main factor when analyze writing task authenticity in EAP. Discourse refers to 'language in its context of use' (Flowerdew, 2010, pp.1). Since purposes and contexts may vary significantly, the written texts tend to show different linguistic features in accordance with discourses. According to Barton (1994), 'discourse community' refers to a group which shares the same text or practice features. It can be either people who read a text or participate in a set of discourse practices through reading and writing process. (pp. 57). In academic settings, norms and conventions within specific discourse communities usually show great varieties. Thus, taking the varietiesof discourse communities into consideration is necessary when analyze text authenticity.

Indeed, the authenticity in integrated tasks would be restricted and influenced by several factors, students' academic literacy is one important factor. Academic literacy refers to 'the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community.' (Wingate, 2012, pp.6). In reading-to-write tasks, ESL learners are expected to incorporate selected information from provided reading sources and show their understanding of the text materials in integrated tasks (Chan, Inoue & Taylor, 2015). For students from deprived educational backgrounds, they may lack the knowledge of academic vocabulary, or need additional time to accomplish reading tasks. Also, the material content tends to be mismatched with their own educational experiences, makes it difficult to complete reading tasks or even fail to learn to read, which is defined by Stubbs (1980) as reading failure.

Apart from students' educational background knowledge, learner's language levelalso have negative influence on composition stage. During the reading process, academic writers are expected to apply various reading strategies (Stubbs, 1980), develop in-depth understanding of text materials and find their own voice as participants in academic discourse community (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006), and accountfor their level of proficiency and work towards comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). This not only demands writers to have high language proficiency to develop a general comprehension of the source texts, but to show the ability to transform and manipulate what they have read to the writing tasks.

In addition, learners' language proficiency may impede their perception of the disciplinary requirements in academic writing. In Wingate's study (2012), she monitored undergraduate students in Applied Linguistic program and found that students appear to have incorrect and inaccurate concepts of argument----the central requirement of academic writing. The Academic Writing questionnaire in the

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research showed that the majority of students did not mention key aspects of argumentationand have little awareness of the need to evaluate and analyze sources. The research highlights students' mismatched perception of requirements needed in the discipline.

Overall, though teaching reading and writing in integration in academic settings could encourage authenticity to some extent, it turned out that EAP teachers also need totake several factors into consideration to maintain the maximum function. Previous research mainly focuses on the aspect of texts and fail to recognize the significance of discourse in EAP teaching process. This essay will first discusses learner's various needs, compares disciplinary requirements and learner's learning needs within the discipline, and measures the authenticity in integrated reading-to-write tasks; different communication features existed in two tasks will also be discussed in the essay.

3. Discussion

When considering the diversification of discourse communities and the variety of student's educational levels, it seems necessary for EAP teachers to think aboutseveral factors when teaching reading and writing in integration.

Factor I: Student's diverse literary needs

In EAP settings, academic writers from different academic domains should meet with different disciplinary requirements, thus, their literacy needs can be very different. Reading materials in integrated tasks are selected from different language domains. This great source of input enables teachers to introduce the discourse in particular discipline to students before the composition stage. As Royer, Bates, & Konold (1984)suggested, students could gain three elements from the reading process: the text which is being read, the background knowledge, and the contextual aspects that are relevant in the text interpretation, such as the surrounding text and environment. In the aspect of texts, writers receives lexical and collocation supports from the source texts through the reading process; In the background knowledge aspect, texts provide writers with supports of background information that helps to develop a correct and accurate understanding of the given writing topic. The task completion time is much shorter compared with traditional writing-only tasks; while in contextual aspect, the reading materials can help academic writers at the application level.

Also, the learners' needs are closely linked with the authenticity of the integrated tasks. The literacy support that source texts bring to students would elicit the authenticintegrative language use in real-world writing. Students also have the possibilities to recognize the convention of written language from the source texts through reading tasks. Thus, the reading materials in integrated tasks turns out to be helpful to support learners' diverse literacy needs and to improve their language performances in integrated tasks.

In conclusion, students are more likely to introduce more authentic materials to support their main arguments in the writing tasks after reading and comprehending thereading material.

Factor II: Learner's various language proficiency

The authenticity in integrated tasks would be developed when student's comprehension of the source texts get improved. According to Widdowson (1979), to achieve authenticity, the reader has to be able to interact with the texts which incorporate the intentions of the writers (Widdowson, 1979, pp.165). In reading process of the integrated tasks, students are expected to be able to draw information from the source texts and select the data that is relevant to their disciplinary needs, comprehend the input texts and engage an appropriate discourse domain. Therefore, it seems necessary for students to obtain some prior knowledge so that they can obtain meaning from the printed texts effectively. However, since the educational levels and language abilities of students in integrated tasks would not be the same, it may beyond student's needs in a few certain occasions (that is when the reading failure would happen), and the task function would be impacted as well.

Thus, in order to cater most students' needs and try to avoid reading failure, a effective approach is to simplify language teaching materials in real-world teaching process. As Davies (1984, pp.182) suggested, 'simplification of texts must be related to audience comprehension.' A text becomes authentic when it enables its audience to understand it. Therefore, when teachers select language data for language teaching purposes, they shall give priority to the students' needs by ranking texts on a scale of readability and selecting texts on the basis of a simplified status. The simplified texts can help students understand the source texts and reinforce their involvements in tasks. When students' needs of understanding the source texts are fully satisfied, the authenticity of a reading-to-write task can be

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developed.

Factor III: different communication features in integrated tasks

Generally, reading and writing are two tasks with different linguistic focuses, but they also share similarities: 1.both performed in the written form; 2.both are communicative activities. Reading is a conversation between the author and the reader,while writing can be seen as a communication between the writer and an imagined reader. In order to make reading materials assessable and acceptable to its readers, text authors are expected to provide contextual information explicitly. It can be seen as communication between interlocutors in form of printed texts, as they interact tocall for negotiations to arrive at the mutual agreement with each other. While writingis seen as an interaction between the author and the imagined reader, it seems an one-way communication. In composing process, there is no information change between writers and readers because the action of reading has not yet happened. Though the academic writer seeks to gain understanding from imagined readers, it appears to be a delayed action. While in reading process, the author tries to provide adequate information and related contexts to aid these supposed readers to recognize main ideas though comprehension.

Since both tasks are conversational interactions, the authenticity of integrated tasks can be impacted by their communication characteristics. As we have discussed before,communication is interactive in the reading process, as the context-dependent reading materials provide students with links between the text and the social situation. However, it is also an one-way communication in writing tasks. Readers are free from any discourse constraints, this enables them to select topic-related information from original discourse and modify the information to fit in their own discourses in composition stages. For example, the same research result can be used by its author to support the arguments that are intended to demonstrate. However, it can also be usedto explain the arguments of another writer as long as it is adjusted appropriately to fit in the new discourse in the texts.

Due to different communication features in two tasks, the authenticity of the integrated reading-into-writing tasks seems to be uncertain. When teaching the two skills in integration in the EAP setting, students may benefit from the contextualized reading by receiving literacy supports. However, it is difficult for teachers to ensurethe application of selected information in decontextualized writing process. If studentshave the ability to adjust selected information from the source texts to their discourse, and appropriate use to support their arguments, the tasks can be seen as authentic; by contrast, tasks may fail to achieve authentic when students use the information from the reading material inappropriately and unreasonably. It seems to be less possible for the teacher to identify the student's usage of information in the composing process. Therefore, the authenticity of the integrated tasks would remain uncertain.

4. Conclusion

The relevance of reading and writing tasks has been widely recognized by many scholars. As reading materials can provide literacy supports to students, teaching reading and writing in integration is argued to benefit authenticity. However, different discipline discourse communities and communicative features also need to be considered by teachers. The authenticity of integrated tasks would be encouraged when the source texts elicit student's authentic integrative language use in real-world writing. However, the application of selected information from contextualized reading materials in decontextualized writing process and the resulting influence on the authenticity of integrated tasks is challenging to identify.

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