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Identity work in the academic writing classroom: Where gender meets social class

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how non traditional male undergraduate students from linguistic minorities perform gender on an academic writing programme and what this tells us about the significance of gender for the teaching of academic writing in the contemporary academy. I focus on how gender is performed in talk about academic discourse and reveal the attraction of 'laddish' identities. I aim to deepen understanding in EAP of the importance of the social world on classroom relations and contribute to research that has considered identity in relation to the written outputs of students and scholars. To gain a more nuanced understanding of gender, an intersectional approach is adopted, in which gender is viewed in intersection with social class. I argue that the gender-class nexus is of significance for teaching academic writing in that it reveals how the social world orients students to language learning and their positioning in deficit discourses. I demonstrate how understanding of these issues can be developed through fine-grained analysis of spoken interaction and contend that language-as-resource approaches to linguistic diversity offer a productive way forward for EAP and for teaching in contexts of linguistic diversity in higher education.

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1. Introduction

In class today, we discussed the departmental requirement for students to read broadsheet newspapers. The discussion got heated. The students described themselves as “a generation on the move” who didn't like to read texts aimed at “the elderly” – the identity they ascribed to readers of *The Guardian* and *The Times*. Several expressed the opinion that tabloid newspapers and lifestyle magazines represented “who they were”. This left me wondering how these papers and magazines represented “who they were” and why they were resistant to reading more serious stuff (Diary entry).

At the start of today's session, a male student told me “I want you to know I write poetry. Please do not tell the others”. What a shame he doesn't want me to tell the class. Why didn't he want his peers to know? (Diary entry).

When I walked into class today, a male student was wielding a chair above his head in a dispute with another man. I had to get into school ma'am mode to break up whatever was going on and to attempt to create an environment where we could get on with work. I feel like I'm having to police this group far too much. Why is this happening in a university? (Diary entry).

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These diary extracts arose from my experiences as an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) tutor teaching academic writing to first-year undergraduate students entering higher education in the United Kingdom. In the UK the student population has diversified significantly in recent years to include many more students who use English as an additional, second or foreign language and/or who have less experience of academic literacy practices and essayist traditions (Lillis, 2001). EAP practitioners, who historically taught academic writing to under and postgraduate international students, have been increasingly tasked with developing academic writing programmes to support this diverse population of students and was the context of the research on which this paper reports.

In this article, I illustrate how examining interaction in the academic writing classroom can shed light on the significance of gender for academic writing. I draw on Norton's (1995, 2013) and Block's (2003, 2007) contention that the social world of the language learner is strongly implicated in language learning. This informs my view of gender as part of a language learner's social world. As we will see, the social world came into play in the classroom and oriented the students to academic writing in particular ways. It informed the students' view of academic discourse as 'posh' and 'other' to themselves. The social world contributed to their ideas that they would be viewed as 'posh' if they used 'long words', 'long sentences', 'proper' English, or were seen reading books and broadsheet newspapers, and coloured views of their everyday linguistic practices as 'slang'. These views point to Snell's (2013) work on commonly held assumptions about dialects as discrete entities that are approached as deficit or difference. Deficit approaches are hierarchical in that standardized language varieties are accorded prestige and associated with educated, professional elite groups while vernacular varieties are marginalized and viewed as deficient. Difference approaches provide a counter narrative of equality in that dialects are viewed as appropriate for communication in particular domains of use. However, both approaches have contributed to the idea that in the classroom, students should use 'one dialect only' and 'one dialect at a time', i.e. the prestige variety, similar to the idea of 'one language only' and 'one language at a time' (Li & Wu, 2009) in the language classroom. As Snell argues, and as this article seeks to illustrate, the notion of rigid boundaries between dialects and languages is problematic and is likely to be counterproductive when it comes to the education of bi/multilingual and/or bi-dialectal users of English. As I illustrate in this paper, the construction of a 'posh-slang' binary was indicative of the disjuncture between the students' life worlds and the academy and the 'out-of-place' (Bauman, 2004, p. 12) feelings that academic discourse inspired. These feelings were exacerbated by institutional gate-keeping practices in which many students arrived on the programme as a result of a mandatory diagnostic test rather than through self or tutor referral. These practices contributed to perceptions of the programme as language remediation rather than language development.

As discussed elsewhere (Preece, 2016), feeling out-of-place is a key factor in identity work. When we feel out of place, we attend to our identity by comparing ourselves with others and displaying allegiances. Identity work often arises in educational contexts as students go about forming and maintaining social relationships. Focusing on social relations in the academic writing classroom reveals how gender comes into play as a dimension of identity and how gender identities orient students to academic writing. In this article, I focus on male students, the attraction of laddish identities in the academy and how these oriented men to academic writing. To gain a more nuanced understanding of gender identities, I take an intersectional approach (Block & Corona, 2016), in this case viewing gender in intersection with social class. Class is clearly relevant to EAP given the focus in EAP on prestige varieties of language and the literacy practices of groups with high social status. I argue that a better understanding of the relationship between gender and class can be gained in EAP through fine-grained analysis of spoken interaction in teaching and learning settings and that this analysis lays the foundation for pedagogic practices aiming to orient students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to academic writing in the contemporary academy.

2. Gender and social class in EAP

Gender and social class have received some attention in the interrelated fields of EAP, ESOL and Academic Literacies with researchers arguing for the need for more sustained attention to how these dimensions intersect and how they impact on the teaching and learning of EAP and academic writing (e.g. Chun, 2009; Kubota, 2003; Lin, 1999). In line with applied linguistics more generally, gender in EAP research tends to be viewed as either synonymous with biological sex (i.e. male or female) or as socially constructed (see Introduction this issue) (see Appleby, 2009; Belcher, 2009; Hyland, 2012). I take the view of gender as a social construct, as an important marker of identity and as intrinsically linked to other dimensions of identity, such as sexuality, ethnicity and social class. This multidimensional view of gender calls for an intersectional approach, in which consideration is given to how gender shapes/is shaped by other identity inscriptions. Intersectionality, as Block and Corona (2016: 508) argue, allows us to point to 'the complexity of identity in the increasingly varied and variable circumstances of the times in which we live'.

The significance of social class in EAP has received less attention. Block's call (2014) for applied linguistics to focus on social class in order to make 'sense of the social realities of twenty-first-century societies' (p. 2) seems particularly pertinent for EAP, given its concern for learning, teaching, scholarship and research that aims to address the linguistic (and cultural) needs of students from diverse backgrounds in UK universities. Definitions of 'social class' tend to foreground material conditions particularly in relation to economic, cultural and social capital (see Savage et al., 2015). Economic capital refers to material wealth and income and is traditionally associated with occupation. In the UK, the university sector, along with other institutions, routinely uses the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) of jobs to assign socioeconomic status to students. Applied to language learning, economic capital relates to the amount of disposable income individuals can devote to language learning resources (e.g. books and tutors), activities (e.g. classes) and visits to places where the target language is used. Cultural capital is associated with tastes, interests and activities and the acquisition of related knowledge, expertise and

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