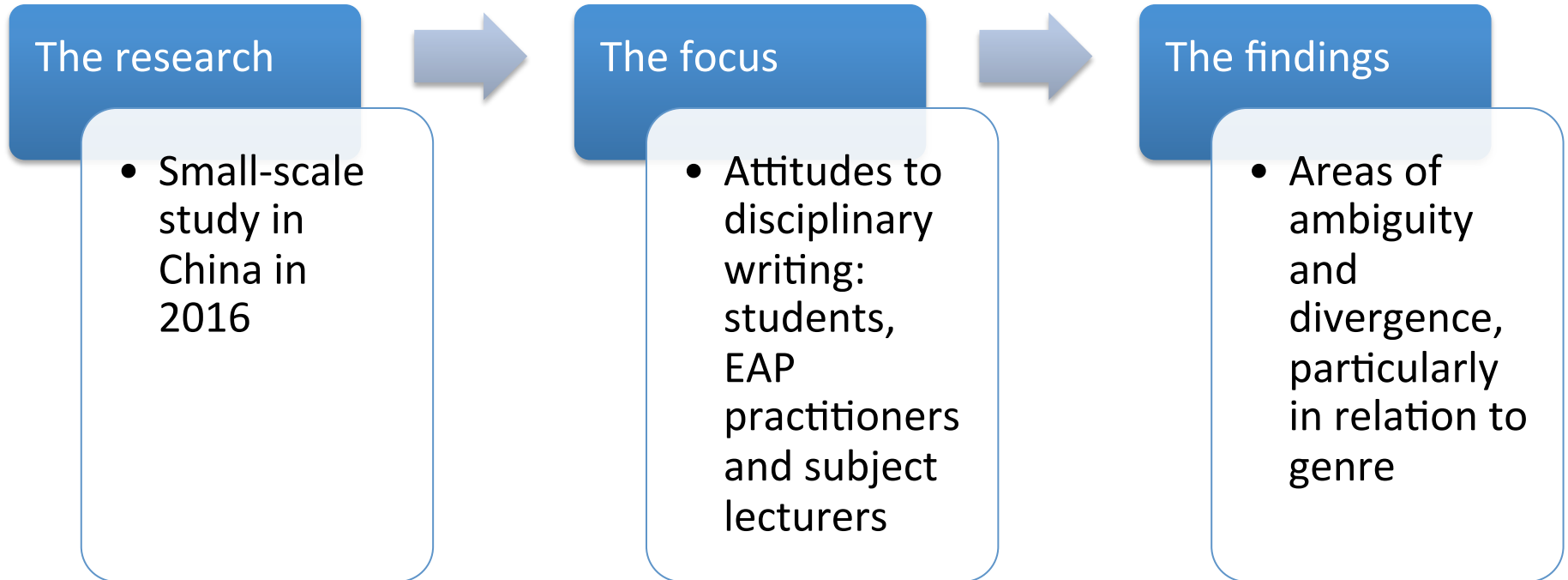


Expectations and Ambiguities in Disciplinary Writing: A Context-specific Exploration of Genres in the Periphery

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Introduction



Today's talk

- Student writing in global contexts
- Research context and approach
- Difficulties and ambiguities in disciplinary writing
- Conclusion and implications
- Questions

Student Writing in Global Contexts

- Diversification: students, contexts, genres
- Socially-situated approach:
 - *Writing as a social practice grounded in institutional power dynamics manifest conflicting expectations (Lea & Street, 1998).*
- Text-based approach:
 - *Genre analysis, Nesi & Gardner (2012)*
 - *Lancaster (2014) on stance across disciplines*
- Focus on home students in inner circle institutions, neglecting international students across global contexts including transnational contexts
 - *“global contact zones” (Singh & Doherty, 2004, p.9)*

Research context and approach

- Transnational college in China
 - 2000 students, 20 EAP teachers and 50 subject lecturers, range of backgrounds
 - International foundation programme: 375 Business students
 - Business and Economics assignments in first semester (study conducted in second semester)
- Research questions to explore perceptions and attitudes to these assignments
 1. What difficulties do students experience in understanding the requirements and expectations of their lecturers in written assignments?
 2. How do EAP teachers perceive the expectations of subject lecturers and how do they address any difficulties that students may experience?
 3. What do subject lecturers consider to be effective academic writing?
- Semi-structured interviews: four students, four EAP teachers, one Business and one Economics lecturer
- Questionnaire: 96 students (93 responded)

Difficulties and ambiguities in disciplinary writing

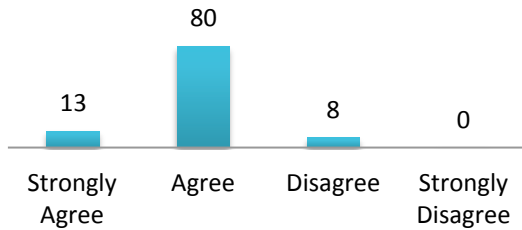
Divergences
across and within
disciplines

Ambiguity related
to the purpose of
assignments

Ambiguities over
expectations for
genre and
structure

Divergences across and within subjects

Q1: Depending on the subject, there are differences in what teachers expect in written assignments.

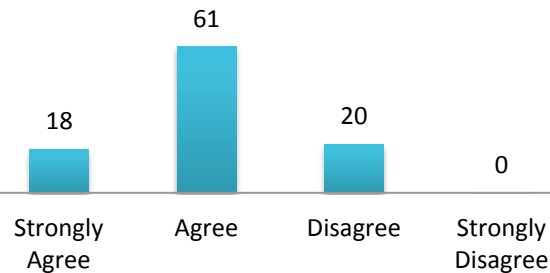


“Common” (Sam)

“Terrible” (Camille, Olivia)

“This is like no standard for teachers ... for assignments, just what the teacher they thought, not like there is a standard”. (Sam)

Q7: Sometimes teachers within the same subject give different advice on assignments.

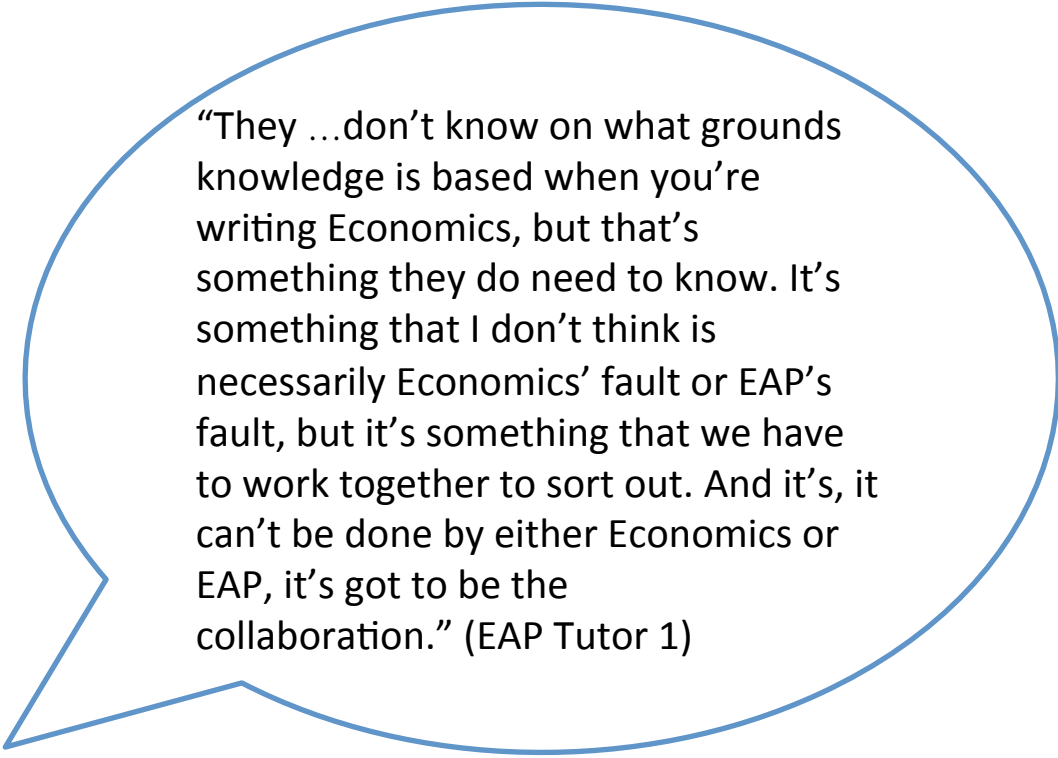


Divergence across and within subjects

- Differences in approach across disciplines:
 - *Expectations for use of sources and types of evidence*
 - *A few references from textbook and maybe a newspaper article or website (Business)*
 - *A wide range of academic sources (Economics)*
- Differences within subjects:
 - *Economics: 'we're not robots'*
 - *Business: aware of divergences and tried to mitigate through more standardisation and marker training*

Divergence across and within subjects

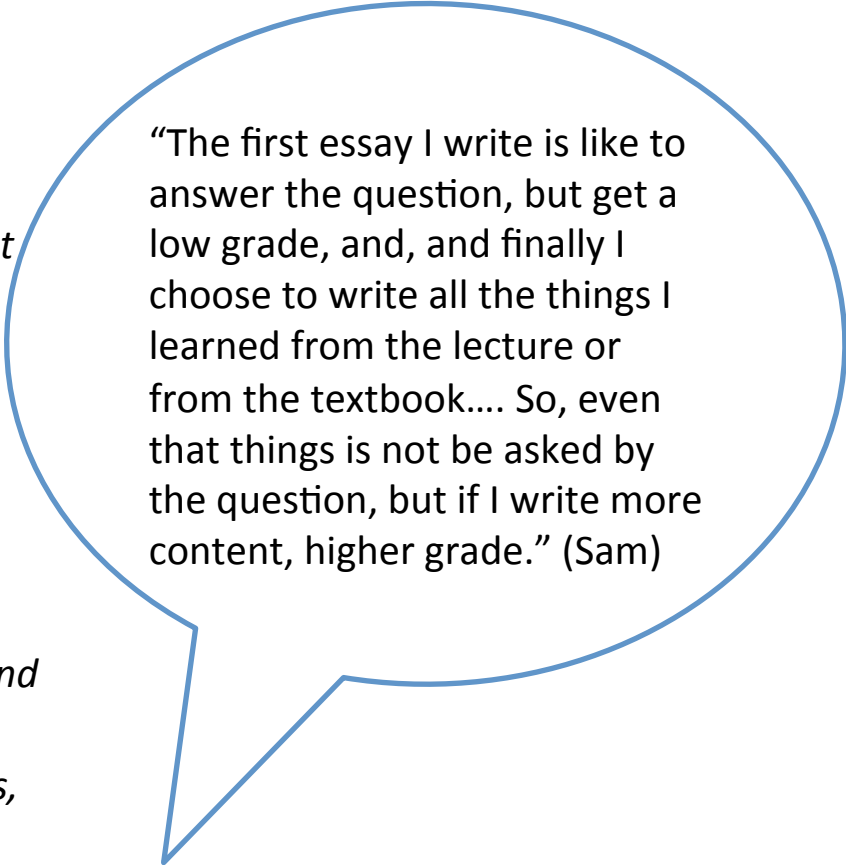
- EAP tutors noted differences in expectations for use of sources and evidence.
- Differences within subjects amplified by discussion outside classroom.



“They ...don’t know on what grounds knowledge is based when you’re writing Economics, but that’s something they do need to know. It’s something that I don’t think is necessarily Economics’ fault or EAP’s fault, but it’s something that we have to work together to sort out. And it’s, it can’t be done by either Economics or EAP, it’s got to be the collaboration.” (EAP Tutor 1)

Ambiguity related to the purpose of assignments

- Display knowledge or engage with question?
 - *“maybe the teachers think we can’t have our personal idea, because all the information we get is just from the teacher” (Sam)*
 - *“if we use our personal ideas, our stance, in the essay, probably teacher will think that we don’t understand” (Athena)*
- Business assignment on staff motivation
 - *Sam & Athena: divided text into different roles and selected motivation techniques*
 - *Olivia: included all techniques covered in lectures, and got a better mark*



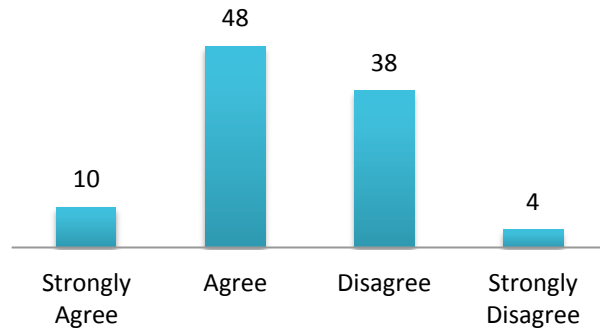
“The first essay I write is like to answer the question, but get a low grade, and, and finally I choose to write all the things I learned from the lecture or from the textbook.... So, even that things is not be asked by the question, but if I write more content, higher grade.” (Sam)

Ambiguity related to the purpose of assignments

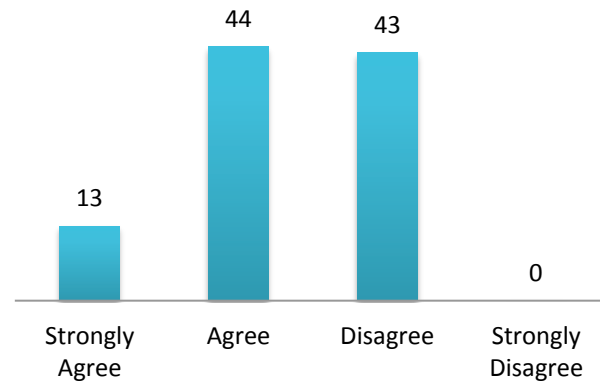
- Business
 - *Understanding of lecture content*
- Economics
 - *“we deliver stuff in the lectures, ... what we’re looking for then is for them to explain it back to us really. ...that’s what I see assignments for, at this level”*
 - *a critical line of argument focused on the question, “rather than spreading a huge net and trying to cram in everything”.*
- EAP
 - *Confusion over instructions, “Then when I saw the grades that they got that were, well, alarmingly bad, some of it was advice that I had given them that they had gotten marked down on ...” (EAP Tutor 3)*

Ambiguities over expectations of genre and structure

Q3: I was confused by what sort of text I should write for the Semester 1 Business assignment (e.g. essay, report).

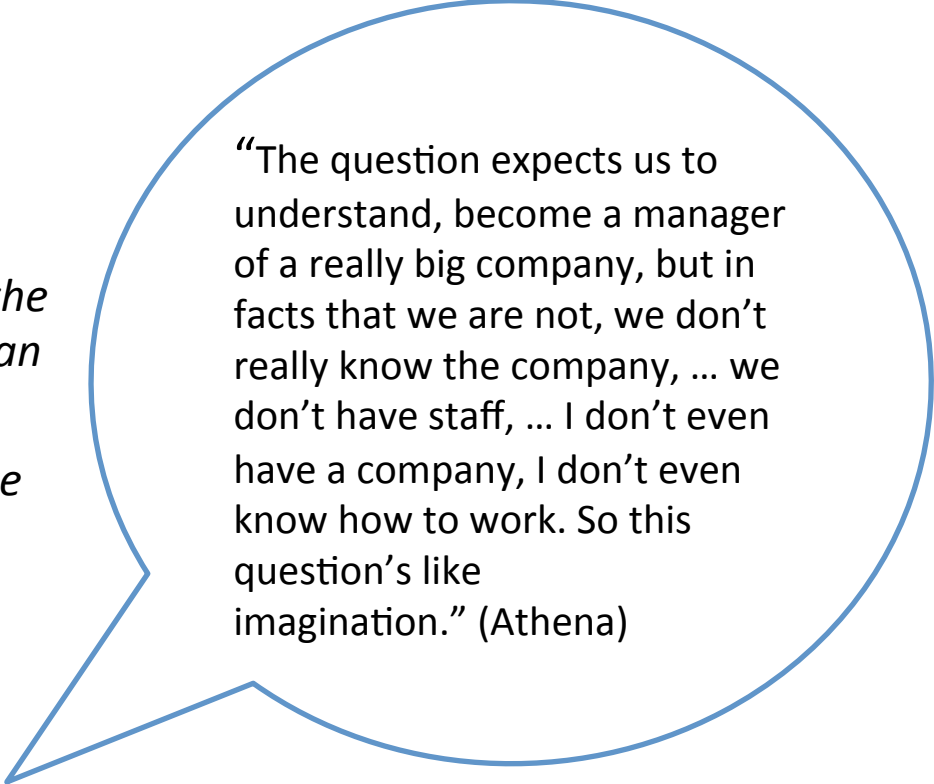


Q6: It was difficult for me to understand how to structure the Semester 1 Economics assignment



Ambiguities over expectations of genre and structure

- Importance of text structure
 - *“She just write a whole page of definitions of theories”.* (Olivia)
- Confusion over text-type
 - *“So it’s kind of like a report, so, but the teacher said you could also write as an essay’.* (Olivia)
 - *“it’s like a plan, plan how to motivate the staff”* (Camille)
- Audience & identity
 - *“The question in the Business assignment, I think it’s too informal.”* (Sam)



“The question expects us to understand, become a manager of a really big company, but in facts that we are not, we don’t really know the company, ... we don’t have staff, ... I don’t even have a company, I don’t even know how to work. So this question’s like imagination.” (Athena)

Ambiguities over expectations of genre and structure

- EAP tutors
 - *“I think there was a big issue ... there was an assignment that asked for a report, but then as you, you read the requirements of the assignment it sounded more like an essay, so there was confusion there.” (EAP Tutor 4)*
 - *“You can never generalize too much because it’s always very context-specific, so you need to go to the context and find out exactly what the requirements are” (EAP Tutor 1)*
- Business & Economics lecturers
 - *“the structure itself doesn’t necessarily affect their scores, because we’re looking at the content. But where the structure’s important is in the coherence of the essay. When there is no structure, and when they’re just bouncing from one point to another point to another point, you can’t follow what they’re trying to say” (Economics)*
 - *“If they have a mess structure of the report or essay, it’s very difficult to follow, so it will affect the score, for sure” (Business)*

Conclusion & Implications

- Ambiguity over aims and expectations caused real anxiety in this context.
- Universities as contact zones: blurring of boundaries between inner and outer circle, home and international students, home and international staff - genre may be context-specific, always in flux.
- Context-specific collaboration:
 - *Identifying and teaching strategically important genres (Wingate & Tribble, 2013); but approach only ever as good as the quality of collaboration – needs to be fostered at an institutional level*
 - *Issues with teaching genres as these are not ‘frozen artefacts’ but are fluid and subject to change as discourse communities are in flux (Hyland, 2006) – collaboration is always a work in progress*
- Professional development for academic subject staff
 - *Genre awareness and academic literacies – needs institutional backing*
- Critical approach to course design and materials:
 - *Difficult for any particular approach to really establish itself - focus on must be building students’ criticality, resilience and tolerance of ambiguity.*

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Questions?