

Academic Writing in Israel: Birth and Development

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Abstract

It has been an uphill battle, but in one form or another, academic writing courses in English are operating in most of the universities in Israel today. In 1987, the Wolfson Family Charitable Trust approached UTELI, (the University Teachers of English Language in Israel) and offered to sponsor a pilot project to teach Israeli PhD students to improve their writing. It seemed that Israeli academics were losing ground in the international scientific community. The courses were originally designed for PhD and post-doctoral students, since undergraduate courses in Israel are taught in Hebrew. The original project was extended to all the universities in Israel, following which, most academic institutions agreed to support the teaching of writing and eventually to take over the financial support. Thus, the first generation of organized English academic writing courses in Israel was born. In this paper, we will elaborate on how the original PhD project has developed in the seven major institutions of higher education in Israel and where we hope to go from here.

Introduction

Israel is an old-new country. The history of Israel is at least 3,000 years old; on the other hand, the modern state of Israel was born only 59 years ago. Although its inhabitants are known as «the people of the Book», academic writing, as we know it today, is a product of the modern State of Israel rather than its ancient forerunner.

Background

The first university in modern Israel opened its doors in 1927, twenty-one years before the State of Israel was formally established. It was based on European models, with the idea that the cultured, intellectual community should be able to learn and to spread knowledge to

the masses throughout the nation and the world. There were very few books available in Palestine in those days; so the system was based mainly on lectures and discussion, the professors being the privileged few who had already breathed the air of the European university tradition. In some ways, though, this oral tradition was not unlike the discussion in yeshivot, where groups of students pour over one text and discuss it in all its implications (or: milk it dry). Only the greatest scholars and rabbis record their interpretations in writing for posterity.

The Weizmann Institute of Science opened its doors in 1934. This was to be a different kind of academic institution; namely a research center for graduate students who would devote their lives to using science

for the benefit of mankind. Scientists and professors were expected to publish the results of their research, and it was assumed that they knew how to do this. Many of them did.

After the establishment of the State, studying at a university, however, continued to be a privilege of the very few; most people were concerned with drying the swamps, making the desert bloom, and struggling to make a living – nation building rather than academia. It took a few more years before additional universities were established. Soon afterwards, the teaching of English for Academic Purposes in Israeli institutions of higher education became an established field.

However, the focus was primarily on reading comprehension. By this time, there were more books imported from abroad available, and although courses were taught in Hebrew, students had to cope with bibliographies and textbooks that were written in English. The universities reluctantly took on some of the responsibility for helping students to do so, but the dominant attitude was that students who couldn't cope with their reading assignments in English did not belong in the university. As to writing, it was assumed that if students could read in English, they could also write in English. Indeed, if people were studying at universities, they certainly knew how to write in Hebrew, the national language, and therefore, they could do so in English.

Certainly, students had to write seminar papers and theses, mostly in Hebrew. Students entering Israeli universities were expected to know how to write without being trained and without getting feedback on their writing. It was simply assumed that if you were accepted to a university, then you knew how to write academic papers. As more students were being asked to publish during their graduate studies, and in many cases, especially in the sciences, it had to be done in English for international journals, PhD advisors were expected to teach their students how to write and how to publish and to initiate them into the international scientific community. Thus, Israeli universities never developed a tradition of «freshman composition» or Writing Across the Curriculum, either in Hebrew or in English. At best, there did exist several courses, one at the Hebrew University and one at Tel Aviv University, which focused on academic writing in English. The Hebrew U. course was taught gratis and served only faculty members, not students. The Tel Aviv U. course was funded directly from the Rector's office and served only a handful

of PhD students and some faculty members. Both of these courses were taught by teachers with no writing instruction background or experience and little or no theoretical framework.

There were composition courses in the English literature departments at some of the universities but only for literature students whose native language, on the whole, was English. In the early 1980's, Bella Rubin designed a «bridge course» at TAU to help students whose writing was not good enough so that they could improve and eventually be accepted into the English Literature Department. This course ran for years and was actually the first academic writing in English course for EFL students in Israel, but it served only literature students. Israelis who wished to publish in international journals, however, generally hired Anglo immigrants to translate and/or edit their work, a grueling but profitable task for the lucky British, Americans, or South Africans.

The Wolfson Initiative

These were the dominant attitudes for many years by those who made pedagogical decisions. Then in 1986, the Wolfson Family Charitable Trust, a trust that had previously given financial support in the sciences to institutions of higher education in Israel, approached UTELI, (the University Teachers of English Language in Israel) and offered to sponsor a pilot project to teach Israeli PhD students to improve their writing. It seemed to the sponsors that Israeli academics were losing ground in the international scientific community.

A committee consisting of a representative from three major universities was established and a proposal was drawn up by the late Nelson Berkoff, who was subsequently appointed the coordinator of a one-year pilot project. The courses were originally designed for PhD and post-doctoral students only, since undergraduate courses in Israel are taught in Hebrew. The major aim was to prepare students to write research papers and minimally to make conference presentations. In its earliest stage, the Wolfson Project consisted of three selected writing instructors who were to design their own syllabi and create their own instructional materials, with guidance from the project coordinator. Thus, the first generation of organized English academic writing courses in Israel was born.

During that first year, there were periodic meetings with the coordinator where ideas and materials were shared and some strategies were discussed. It turned

out that each of the instructors had his/her own approach in materials design and in classroom methods and management. For example, one teacher worked extensively on paragraph development and traditional rhetoric, whereas another went straight to the scientific journals, using published articles as models – a genre-oriented approach. The coordinator's proposed syllabus, on the other hand, using the research of Linda Flower (L1) and Vivian Zamel (L2), among others, as a theoretical underpinning for what should be done in the classroom, was based on the process approach to writing instruction intended mostly for undergraduate students. The language of the proposal and some of the underlying principles were steeped in a framework of then current approaches and strategies for the teaching of reading comprehension, not academic writing. We were in the midst of moving from one mindset to another, finding ourselves in a sort of subliminal state. Despite the original shortcomings, there were some sound principles that we followed from the beginning, some of which we still uphold today, such as careful attention to the intended «reader»; the use of an initial «composition» for diagnostic purposes, later to be compared to a final «composition»; emphasis on feedback from the students (student letters) and the instructors (periodic reports), as well as from the coordinator (observation of teachers and some sort of evaluation of instructional materials). Above all, we stressed authenticity: students used real data, no matter what discipline, in the main writing tasks they did.

The original project was extended to all the universities in Israel, following which, most academic institutions agreed, although some reluctantly, to support the teaching of writing and eventually to take over the financial support. The Technion, the Israeli Institute for Technology, for instance, joined the Wolfson Project in 1989, but only two semesters later, the Technion itself, took over the funding for the Academic Writing Course for PhD students, and in 2003, this course became compulsory for all PhD students at all faculties at the Technion.

After the pilot, changes started to take place both in the pedagogical approach and the management of the project. Instead of the instructors selecting the scientific articles to be used as models, the students themselves brought in material from their specific fields of research. Students wrote authentic abstracts for conferences and/or articles; grant proposals; parts

of their thesis; book chapters; experimental research reports; conference papers; review articles; even academic correspondence ... and CV's. Most courses were geared either to the biological sciences, exact sciences, humanities, or social sciences, but some were mixed. The emphasis shifted from text analysis for the purpose of comprehension to scientific articles as well as student generated texts as a basis for writing strategies.

Although we were working with graduate students who had to produce real-world texts, we continued to use the process approach and we developed criteria for assessment and evaluation without using grades. We insisted on individual student conferences and maintaining contact with subject specialists/PhD advisors.

Current Trends

Today's practices, based on the original Wolfson Project, reflect the development of academic writing research in the 21st century and vary somewhat in the different institutions throughout Israel.

Comparison of the Original Project to Today's Programs

Original Project	Today
Only 3 universities and 3 instructors involved	Almost all institutions of higher learning have some kind of an academic writing program.
Academic writing taught in English only	Academic writing programs have evolved in Hebrew as well as in English.
Class size limited to 12 students	Larger classes, but emphasis on one-to-one student-teacher conferences/tutorials and e-mail
Program evaluation emphasized but not systematically applied and implemented	Program evaluation more systematized and performed both during and after courses end
Program goals: how to write a research article for a journal and later on improvement of oral skills	Many more genres dealt with (e.g., grant proposals, thesis chapters, conference presentations, email, letters to journal editors, CV writing, use of PowerPoint)
Instructor chose scientific articles to be read	Students choose their own scientific articles in their specific fields of research to be used as model texts.
Instruction dealt with reading strategies	Texts used for the learning of writing strategies
Process approach to the teaching of writing	Process and product approach; emphasis on authentic texts from real data which students were intending to publish; emphasis on content-based courses with actual tasks students have to do for their subject courses (e.g., write progress reports)
Some emphasis on audience/reader	More refined emphasis on audience: readership of journals, members of academic committees, conference organizing committees, journal editors, etc.
The use of an initial «composition» for diagnostic purposes, later to be compared to a final «composition,»	Initial writing sample produced by students but generally not compared to final writing sample, as no grades are usually given in PhD courses. This practice varies in different institutions.
Some oral skills included	Addition of mini-conference where students practice oral presentation skills with PowerPoint and videos
Paper and pencil courses only	Use of e-learning and virtual courses
Some contact attempted with subject specialists	Better contact with subject specialists, student advisors, university administrators
Assessment of written work mainly, if not exclusively, by the instructor	Peer review, including criteria for judging written work, in addition to instructor assessment

Among recent innovations in various programs is the Master of Science in Engineering Course at Tel Aviv University developed jointly by Bella Rubin and an engineering professor; a special program combining literature and academic writing at Haifa University developed by Hadara Perpignan, and courses for biology students at the Weizmann Research Institute taught by a PhD in biology who has also become an expert in academic writing. At Bar Ilan, in addition to the PhD program, all masters degree students who do not show exemption mastery are required to take academic writing courses in English, and at the Technion, the Graduate

School Dean wishes to extend the compulsory academic writing program to the masters level as well. There is also a high level, undergraduate writing course at the Technion, which is called Communication in English for Scientists and Engineers. This is an elective which focuses on both writing and presentation skills. It grew out of the specific request by the high-tech industry to offer a course at the Technion which would provide graduates with the skills they will need when they enter the professional world.

The Dept. of EFL at Ben Gurion University has offered two graduate-level writing courses for the past 8 years on

two of its campuses - Beer-Sheva and Sde-Boqer. Both courses were opened as a result of specific requests by the Faculty of Science and the Jacob Blaustein Institute for Desert Research/Albert Katz International School for Desert Studies. Both courses are in fact open to all graduate students at BGU, regardless of faculty of study. In practice, most of the students are from the faculties of technology and social sciences. Once in a while a student from humanities takes the writing course but this is rare. An interesting point is that students on the BS Campus study in Hebrew (the accepted practice in Israel) while students at Sde-Boqer (Albert Katz International School for Desert Studies) – both Israeli (Jews and Arabs) and international (from Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Jordan) – study in English. Right from its inception in 1994, the administration of the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center, a private institution, has paid serious attention to writing skills. Prof. Reichman, the dean, expects law school graduates, for instance, to be able to write «decent and intelligible» formal legal letters and case notes (briefs), as well as mini-contracts, short wills, and a research paper, so that students can learn to fully utilize the language of law in English. Similarly, at the other Herzliya programs, the administration has supported excellent, well-developed programs in academic writing.

The growth of the college system in Israel is a story in itself; suffice it to say that many teachers' colleges and other colleges in Israel offer academic degrees today, and, in so doing, have attempted to develop academic writing programs in both Hebrew and English. In one institution, the Kibbutzim College, a writing center has been successfully established. It serves mainly students in the Hebrew departments but is also open to students in the English department for mentoring in academic writing in English. This is no mean feat considering that, try hard as we might, proponents have never gathered enough support from university managers to establish a writing center for the English courses in any university.

The history of Hebrew academic writing courses is another story that should be told one day; unfortunately, there is insufficient space in this paper. Today, there is an interest in academic writing in Hebrew throughout the system. Moreover, more attention is paid to writing skills in general in elementary and secondary schools, especially in Hebrew, but also in English and Arabic. One final innovation is the introduction of academic writing skills in the advanced bachelor's degree EAP

courses in reading comprehension in a number of institutions.

Conclusion

Current challenges to the teaching of academic writing in Israel, as in many other places in the world, include gaining administrative understanding and support, the attack of plagiarism (which seems to have developed even more rapidly than academic writing), and the challenge of collaborative research and joint authorship: who owns the research? A particular problem that we face in Israel, although certainly not unique to Israel, is the issue of teaching academic (or any kind of writing for that matter) to students who come from an oral only culture, such as our Ethiopian immigrants, and the Bedouins of the South.

Still, we have come a long way since the original Wolfson Project. It has been an uphill battle, but in one form or another, academic writing courses in English are operating in most of the institutions of higher education in Israel today. We have continued to emphasize the authentic, practical task, definitely an outgrowth of modern rather than ancient times. In modern Israel, academic writing is no longer the prerogative of the privileged few, but drawing on Israel's ancient roots, we strive to have all its inhabitants belong to the people of the book!

Contributors

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