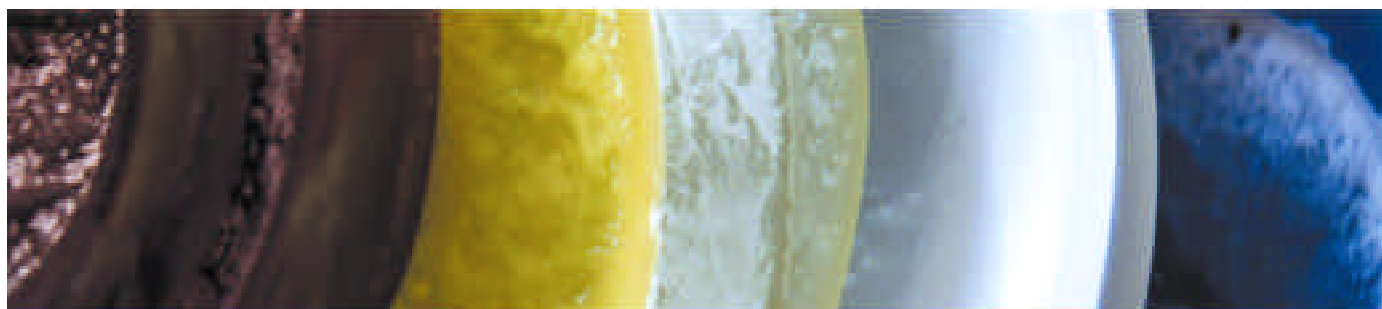# Developing Academic Literacies Through Self-study Material

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Through Self-study Material

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the development of a new 'writing course' for first year university students of the Faculty of English Studies at the University of Athens. Based on the main findings of a research project conducted with these students, we moved away from what is traditionally known as an 'academic writing' course and developed a course on 'academic discourse' placing equal emphasis on developing critical reading, listening, speaking, writing and study skills. Understanding literacy in terms of concrete social practices, our purpose has been to familiarise students who are entering the academic world with a variety of academic texts (both written and oral) and to enable them to function successfully in academic encounters. The paper also reports on the development of self-study material and the use of new technologies in an attempt to enhance students' autonomy in learning.

BIONOTE

Bessie Mitsikopoulou and Angeliki Tzanne are both lecturers at the University of Athens, Faculty of English Studies. Bessie's interests are in the areas of critical theory, academic discourse, writing theory, multimedia and IT applications in education. Angeliki's interests are in the areas of media discourse, academic discourse, stylistics and pragmatics.

Developing Academic Literacies Through Self-study Material

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses issues related to the restructuring of the language programme of the Faculty of English Studies, University of Athens. The Faculty consists of two departments, the Department of Language and Linguistics and the Department of Literature and Culture. All first year students take common courses and they all have to take language and writing courses. However, for years there was a general consensus among faculty members that the students had difficulty in writing academic texts and that their command of the English language was rather poor. It was therefore deemed necessary to restructure the language and writing programme of the Faculty, which up to that point had followed the American tradition of freshman composition writing.

Moving away from what is traditionally known as an 'academic writing' course, we developed a course on 'academic discourse' placing equal emphasis on developing critical reading, listening and speaking as well as writing skills. Understanding literacy in terms of concrete social practices, our purpose was to familiarise students who are entering the academic world with a variety of academic texts (both written and oral) and to enable them to function successfully in academic encounters.

In what follows, we will present our theoretical distance from the model of language and pedagogy that the tradition of 'freshman composition writing' implies, and develop our rationale for adopting a 'multiliteracies' approach to academic literacies. We will then proceed to discuss the findings of a small-scale research project on first year students' understanding of academic texts, and relate the implications of moving from 'academic writing' to 'academic literacies' to the structure of the course and the development of self-study material through the use of new technologies.

2. Critical views of freshman composition writing

Freshman composition writing has been widely criticised for implying a behaviourist model of language and learning, with focus on quantification and measurement. Rose (1985: 341) analyses the institutional discourse of writing instruction in American higher education and argues that it reveals a "reductive, fundamentally behaviorist model of the development and use of written language". This discourse is penetrated by views which consider:

(1) Writing ability in terms of the presence of error
(2) Writing as a skill or a tool
(3) Writing within an autonomous model of literacy.

This discourse of writing abilities and instruction penetrates discussions of programme and curriculum development, instructional evaluation and resource allocation. According to Rose (1985), contemporary books for freshman composition classes promote writing instruction which is 'atomistic', 'error centred' and focused on 'isolated bits of discourse'. To this list we would add 'prescriptive' and 'linguistically reductive'.

In the last years there has been an increased criticism of the pedagogy the freshman composition writing model implies. In this section, we focus our criticism on the model of grammar these books promote, the type of activities students engage in and the language of instruction employed in the textbooks in question.

A careful inspection of textbooks used in freshman composition writing courses is very revealing: rather than analysing academic discourse and explaining the use of the various lexicogrammatical features found in academic texts, handbooks, rhetoric books and instructional manuals provide 'recipes' as to what the students should do, focusing on the particulars of usage, grammar and mechanics. For instance, in *Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers* (1999:290-291), a popular handbook used in freshman composition classes, in a section on 'how to write economically', there is a subsection entitled 'Cut nominalisations' which explicitly instructs students to avoid using nominalisations in their sentences. This, however, contrasts sharply with what research on academic discourse has shown. For example, Halliday and Martin (1993: 128) have shown that nominalisation, the process of turning a verb into a noun, "dominates the language of science". In fact, nominalisation is considered to be one of the main grammatical resources through which scientific taxonomies are realised and scientific knowledge is construed.

Similarly, in another section of the same book entitled 'How to write stylish sentences' (section 15a-6), students are explicitly instructed to 'reduce the number of passive voice' constructions in their writing. Martin (1989:94), on the other hand, who notes "a common prescriptive practice in the teaching of writing cautioning against the use of the passive voice", concludes:

> For a teacher to caution a student against the use of the
> passive voice can be seen as denying him a part of the
> potential present in English for producing coherent text, and
> reflects complete ignorance of the function of this text forming
> resource in English.

The above two examples are typical of a number of handbooks for writers, rhetoric and other books used in freshman composition classes. It is remarkable that these books on academic writing fail to take into account key features of academic discourse, such as nominalisation and passive voice. Instead of illustrating how specific lexicogrammatical features function within academic texts, these books are primarily involved in a rhetoric of appropriacy which the students should acquire in order to become academically literate.

What is also interesting to note is the kind of activities that can be found in these books (see *Table 1* below). Specifically, a careful examination of the suggested activities reveals that students are asked to do 'exercises' focusing on isolated sentences, mostly concerning sentence transformation. Even when a sample paragraph is provided (as in 15.17, 15.21 below), the focus is on mere mechanics of writing.

EXERCISES OF SECTION 15c 'How Can You Write More Economically?'

Exercise 15.13 Revise the following sentences to eliminate the sprawling, wordy, or cliched opening phrase.
Exercise 15.14 Revise the following sentences to reduce nominalizations that make the prose wordy.
Exercise 15.15 Revise the following sentences to condense long verb phrases into more active expression.
Exercise 15.16 Rewrite the following sentences to reduce redundancies and wordiness.
Exercise 15.17 Rewrite the intensifiers in the following passage and cut any words or whole phrases you regard as unnecessary
Exercise 15.18 Revise the following sentences to eliminate unnecessary expletive constructions.
Exercise 15.19 Rewrite these sentences to practice eliminating relative pronouns (who, whom, that, which) that might be contributing to wordiness. Retain any such pronouns you regard as necessary for clarity.
Exercise 15.20 Rewrite the following sentences to reduce clutter by substituting words for wordy phrases. Rearrange the sentences as necessary.
Exercise 15.21 Streamline and strengthen this paragraph from a student's first draft by cutting unnecessary generalizations or explanations and trimming at other places that seem wordy.

(Adapted from Hairston, M., Ruszkiewicz, J., Friend, C. 1999*. The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers.* NY: Longman.)

Table 1 A selection of activities from a Handbook for Writers

Within the logic of 'habit formation' of a behaviourist model of language learning, rules of grammar and usage are followed by practice through drills and exercises like the ones presented above.

A final point of criticism concerns the language of instruction employed in most materials used within the tradition of freshman composition writing. The following headings and subheadings of chapters from two different handbooks for writers are typical examples of the language of instruction used in most

related books. Specifically, using imperative statements throughout, these books present grammatical and other rules students should learn and follow.

15c How Can You Write More Economically?
15c-1 Condense sprawling phrases
15c-2 Cut nominalizations
15c-3 Condense long verb phrases to focus on the action
15c-4 Eliminate doublings and redundancies
15c-5 Eliminate surplus intensifiers
15c-6 Cut down on expletive constructions
15c-7 Cut the number of prepositional phrases

(Adapted from Hairston, M., Ruszkiewicz, J., Friend, C. 1999. *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers.* NY: Longman.)

Chapter 11: Sentence Clarity
11a Put your meaning into grammatically important words
11b Control a sprawling sentence
11c Limit your use of the verb *to be*
11d Convey action through a verb, not an abstract noun
11e In most contexts, prefer the active voice
11f Use formulas like *It is* and *there are* only for special emphasis
11g Avoid an unnecessary that or what clause.

(Adapted from Crews, F. Schor, S., Hennesy M. 1993. *The Borzoi Handbook for Writers.* NY: McGraw-Hill.)

Table 2 Language of instruction in freshman composition materials

A similar didactic and prescriptive tone can be traced in numerous writer's manuals, often called rhetoric books, which are full of rigid rules concerning writing conventions of paragraph and essay structure. The above three points of criticism on which we have focused our attention raise the question of the kind of literacy pedagogy the above model of academic writing implies. In particular, the above description fits an educational psychology's model of language study which reduces it to discrete behaviours and skills to be developed, and a view of language as a stable system with rules the students should learn. It also implies a pedagogy which explicitly instructs students what to do when writing.

3. From 'academic writing' to 'academic literacies'

The tradition of freshman composition described above, although not the only one in the teaching of academic writing, has indeed been a dominant one in the United States as well as in other parts of the world and is supported by a wide collection of publications to be used by first year college and university students. In fact, this tradition constitutes an articulation of an autonomous model of literacy which is restricted to formalised and rule-governed views of language as a system and closely related to the view of the writer as the creator or 'his/her own words'. It is our contention that this model misses the complex nature of academic discourse and leaves out social and cultural considerations of academic and scientific institutions. In agreement with Kress (1989:49), we believe that writers do not have 'their own words' but have the "systematic organisation of words – given to them by the discourses and genres of which they have had experience. The writer is therefore not the creator of 'new words' but the producer of texts" and the materials available to him/her are all "those texts which have a relationship of relevance" to the text under construction, thus creating relations of 'intertextuality' (Bakhtin 1986) with a network of other texts.

In an attempt to incorporate within our language programme the multiplicity and fluidity of academic discourses and genres and the new ways the various communications media are shaping and reshaping our understanding and use of academic discourse today, we turned to adopt a 'multiliteracies' model to academic literacies. Assuming, after Gee (1990), that literacy practices are embedded in social practices and assumptions expressed in the various academic discourses and genres, we moved away from the notion of 'discourse modes' as rigid forms the students follow closely, to the notions of 'genres' as relatively stable sets of conventions that are associated with a socially ratified type of activity, and the notion of 'discourses' as constructions or significations of some domain of social practice from a particular perspective (Fairclough 1992). As a result, the notion of academic litaracies became critical in the design of the course. Our purpose has become primarily to expose our students to a variety of academic texts and to conduct with them an analysis of these texts revealing key features which will lead students

to a thorough understanding of academic discourse. Emphasis has then moved from 'academic writing' to 'academic discourse'.

This shift of emphasis was not only a theoretical one. It was supported by the findings of a small-scale research we conducted with our students in order to assess their comprehension of academic texts. Before we present and discuss the findings of this research, we shall outline the profile of our students, the majority of whom are speakers of English as a Foreign Language, concerning their general English competence and future professional goals.

GENERAL LANGUAGE ABILITY	
61%	CPE holders
23%	FCE holders
6%	Other English language certificate (e.g. GCSE)
10%	no English language certificate
FUTURE GOALS	
65%	teachers of English
25%	translators, interpreters
10%	other

Table 3 Faculty of English Studies: first year students' profile

As we can see from the Table, the majority of our students are holders of CPE, the supreme certificate of language proficiency, while several others are holders of various other English language certificates and only a small number of students do not have any language certificate. Concerning their professional goals, the majority of our students wish to become teachers of English, while several others want to become translators or interpreters. To our mind, this meant two things: firstly, that our students need to attain and maintain a high-level proficiency in English, and secondly, that they need to do so through working with a variety of texts, both written and spoken. The need to work with spoken texts was also stressed by the students themselves, about a third of whom noted that they expected our course to help them

increase their ability to understand spoken texts and improve their spoken skills in English.

In designing the new course, we also conducted a small-scale research, where we investigated first year students' understanding of academic texts by asking them to read a text from an introductory Linguistics textbook on Language and Linguistics and answer some comprehension questions. The findings of this research are presented in *Table 4* below.

Response to the text	Number of students	Certificate holders
1. Thorough understanding of main points	32%	81% (50% CPE holders)
2. Complete misunderstanding of some of the main points of the text	26%	85% (52% CPE holders)
3. Failure to identify covert exemplification and to generalise on the basis of given examples	42%	76% (61% CPE holders)
4. (Mis)interpretation of tentative suggestions as assertions	56%	68% (54% CPE holders)

Table 4 Small-scale research with first-year students

This small-scale research showed that a considerable number of our students failed to grasp the subtle construction of meaning in academic texts, as most of them seemed to be unaware of the cautiousness and tentativeness in the language of these texts, while others failed to distinguish between the specific and the general in the text they read. Additionally, about one third of the students displayed complete misunderstanding of some of the main points of the text. In our view, these findings pointed to the same direction, namely that our students' certified advanced knowledge of the English language appears to be unrelated to their ability to analyse academic discourse. Finally, careful analysis of some of the students' answers revealed language problems, especially inappropriate use of language at the levels of lexis and grammar, which we felt we had to also address in the course.

It then became apparent that, in addition to our own need to work with a different model (for its pedagogical implications), our students' needs pointed to a new way of approaching academic discourse. This led to a reconceptualisation of the course aiming to familiarise the students with various academic texts in order to help them develop both their reception and production abilities.

4. Designing the course on 'academic discourse'

In this section we turn to the 'design' (Cope and Kalantzis 2000) and implementation of the new course on 'academic discourse', and present some basic elements of the 'how' and the 'what' of a pedagogy of academic literacies as we view it for the particular student body. In the table below, we present our appropriation of Cope and Kalantzis' (2000) model concerning the development of an academic literacies pedagogy.

The 'How' of an Academic Literacies Pedagogy

Situated practice
- Immersion in meaningful practices
- Consider affective and sociocultural needs and identities of all learners

Overt instruction
- Systematic, analytic and conscious understanding of academic texts
    - representational: what the meanings refer to
    - social: how the meanings connect the persons they involve (positioning of the reader and the writer, people whose work is being cited)
    - organizational: how the meanings relate to each other (different parts of the texts etc)
- Developing a metalanguage to describe the processes of how we make meaning

Critical Framing
- Interpreting social and cultural contexts
- Students stand back to what they are studying and view it critically in relation to its context
    - situational context (what is happening, to whom, for whom, by whom, why?)
    - institutional context (connections, relationships, effects…)
    - broader cultural and social context (culture, history, society, politics, values)

Transformed Practice
- Tranfer: taking a meaning to another, real academic context and making it work
- Voice: addressing one's own particular interests in an academic context
- Intertextuality and hybridity: making the connections, recognizing influences and cross-references of history, culture and academic experience.

Table 5 The 'how' of an academic literacies pedagogy

In familiarising our students with a variety of academic texts, we considered important the development of a **metalanguage** which would enable them to develop an awareness of the function of academic texts in various contexts. The development of metalanguage was deemed essential for the specific student body, as our students are students of English and future professionals in the area of English studies. Specifically, for these students,

English is
- the medium of instruction,
- the object of study of most courses they will attend, and
- the subject matter of their future professional lives.

Following Cope and Kalantzis (2000) and Kress (1993), we consider metalanguage to be dissociated from rules of correct usage or the kind of 'grammar' you can get right or wrong. In other words, metalanguage is not "a category of mechanical skills, as is commonly the case in grammars designed for educational use" (Cope and Kalantzis 2000:25). By contrast, we take metalanguage to be a highly selective checklist of features of texts, a kind of grammar that contrasts and accounts for different usages. We also consider it to be "a language of reflective generalization that describes the form, content and function of the discourses of practice" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000:34). In general terms, we view metalanguage as a dynamic resource for making meaning.

5. Practical implications for the organisation of the course

In view of the above considerations, we set out to organise the course in such a way as to expose students to a variety of academic texts, focusing each time on the enhancement of their receptive and productive abilities. Viewed from the perspective of academic literacies, our course has taken on a multi-aspected character, with the weekly lecture being the main point of reference around which are organised a number of satellite activities.

The 'What' of an Academic Literacies Pedagogy

Dealing with written academic texts

Critical reflection of written work

Monitoring self study tasks

Weekly lectures

Dealing with spoken academic texts (videotape, audiotape)

Multimedia workshops
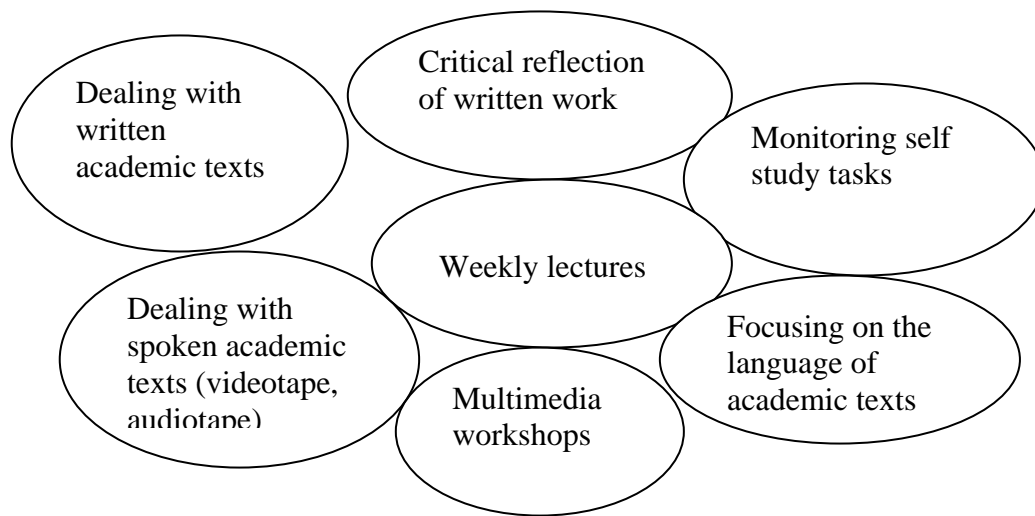
Focusing on the language of academic texts

Table 6 The 'what' of an academic literacies pedagogy

In particular, in addition to the weekly lecture, the students are asked to attend regular seminars that (i) provide students with texts and tasks for further practice on understanding and producing academic discourse, and (ii) deal with writing tasks and involve collective correction of students' past written assignments. Moreover, students are asked to attend multimedia workshops in order to improve their reception of, and response to, spoken academic texts. Both weekly lectures and the related satellite activities motivate students to engage in self-study, which has become a very important aspect of the course.

6. The 'self study' aspect of the course

Our decision to engage students in self-study was partly driven by the large number of students we deal with every year (approximately 450 students), but also - and most importantly - by our wish to motivate students to work on their own initiative and to discover pathways of scientific enquiry for themselves. At present, we are in the process of setting up a self-access learning centre for our students. Our research on available self-access systems showed that our

students' needs are best covered by a combination of what Miller and Rogerson-Revell (1993) call the 'menu-driven system' and the 'controlled-access system' (see table below).

SYSTEM	RATIONALE	HUMAN RESOURCES	END-USERS	MATERIALS
Menu-driven	To cater for an increased number of students	Computer consultant Teaching adviser	Students need to become efficient users of the system through pre-training and practice	Materials are classified and information is stored electronically. Information is classified through keywords (referring to form, content and function of academic texts)
Controlled-access	To motivate and encourage students to study outside class	Teachers Tutors	Students have little control over what to study and the classification system is quite simple	Materials are closely related to work covered in class and classified in a similar way

Table 7 An appropriation of the selected types of self-access systems as presented by Miller and Rogerson-Revell (1993)

We believe that this combination of systems will allow greater flexibility for the organization of material in the self-access centre and will provide students with more opportunities to enhance their ability to deal with academic texts. At this point we should note that we use the latter system extensively in the satellite activities that are organised in relation to the weekly lectures.

As part of our setting up the self-access learning centre at the Faculty, we have collected a large number of texts (spoken and written) and related tasks to be stored and categorised in a multimedia database. The categorisation will be menu-driven and the users will have the opportunity to choose the categorised material according to their needs. The selection of pathways in

the multimedia system will be through keywords which will lead to specific parts of the material.

The combination of hypertext and multimedia technologies are considered a suitable combination for the development of academic literacies, as conceptualised in this paper. First, the electronic linking through hyperlinks will allow the insertion of an individual academic text into a network of other related texts, creating a new kind of textual entity, a hypermedia corpus. Second, this combination will interlink and interweave a variety of materials suitable for an academic discourse course, at different levels of difficulty, encouraging self-paced instruction. Moreover, it will provide quick access to a wide range of related background and contextual materials, promoting the notion of nonsequential reading, a characteristic of advanced academic study. Finally, it will provide a means of integrating materials of this course with other related courses (for instance, materials from other language courses or from other courses offered within our Faculty which would focus on issues of academic discourse).

Considering the ways in which to implement computer-based training, we are examining the options of on-line and off-line applications (see the Appendix below for an outline of the main features of these options as well as for the advantages of each of these options). In the first steps of the incorporation of electronic self-access material for the academic discourse course, we have proceeded with the off-line option in order to maximise use of the existing resources. However, when the gradual development of the self-access learning centre is completed, the on-line option of a local network will be more cost effective and will allow changes, improvements or additions in the educational material included in the database. At a later stage of the implementation, making the material available through the Internet will allow greater possibilities for the publication of the material in hypertext form and the development of interactive educational programs.

The self-access learning centre will not only be restricted to the materials we will develop. It will also be enriched with instructional courseware for academic discourse available in the market as well as with other electronic materials available. Specifically, it will include various types of resource materials which the students will be able to use in order to conduct their own research and analysis of academic texts. For instance, students will have access to a number of language corpora as well as to audio and video tapes with lectures and other types of academic texts. *Table 8* below presents an overview of the different types of materials which will be available in the self-access learning centre at the Faculty of English Studies.

SELF-ACCESS LEARNING CENTRE			
Videotapes Audiotapes (e.g. lectures)	**Menu-driven database**	**On-line and off-line computer language corpora**	**Instructional courseware**
Material for familiarizing students with academic texts	Self-access material for developing academic literacies	Electronic search for grammatical - lexical items	Educational CD-ROMs for developing academic literacies

Table 8 The development of the self-access learning centre

7. Conclusion

Many important changes have taken place in moving from an 'academic writing' to an 'academic discourse' course. Firstly, the focus of the course has changed from rigid and stable discourse modes which the students should be exposed to and trained to model, to academic genres and discourses students analyse in order to develop an understanding of the various ways they interact and interrelate in academic texts.

Secondly, the emphasis has shifted from the production (where students follow rules of correct usage and 'model' texts in order to produce similar texts) to both reception and production of academic texts. The primary purpose of the new course is to familiarise students with a variety of academic texts and help them develop an awareness of academic institutions and culture.

Thirdly, rigid rules of 'correct' usage, grammar and mechanics (e.g. 'Cut nominalizations') students have to learn and adopt when producing their own texts have been replaced by a metalanguage upon which students draw as meaning making representations (e.g. show how 'nominalisations' contribute to the constitution of academic knowledge).

Fourthly, while in 'academic writing' textual analysis was performed on the basis of traditional grammatical categories that make up the language 'system' (e.g. noun, verb, etc), in 'academic discourse' textual analysis is performed on the basis of features such as modality, transitivity, nominalisation, global and local coherence relations, and information structure, which function as meaning making resources upon which people draw.

Finally, the structure of the course has become more complex, as it has moved from class instruction to a scheme comprising class instruction, seminar tutoring, and self study, which we view as an essential aspect of learning upon which increasing emphasis should be placed.

We conclude by noting the need for continuous evaluation of our language and writing programme, and for any such programme in general. Rose (1985) calls for a rigorous examination of our own teaching and investigation of model of language that lies beneath it. In a similar vein, we believe that there is always a need to critically examine the 'design' (Cope and Kalantzis 2000) of the course, as well as the consistency in the metalanguages we use with our students. Finally, we agree with Lea and Street (1999) that our students

struggle to read off the university and its requirements and to unpack the demands in the course of their academic programmes. We believe that it is only through a continuous critical examination of our own 'design' and teaching practices that we can help students overcome these difficulties.

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Appendix

COMPUTER BASED TRAINING IN THE
SELF-ACCESS LEARNING CENTRE

Two ways of implementing Computer Based Training applications:

On-line	Off-line
Local network: The computers of the Faculty of English Studies are connected together through a central computer – the server - in a local network. Instructional material is stored and used accordingly.	Through multimedia CDs: Instructors choose from the existing multimedia CDs of the Self-Access Learning Centre and schedule in advance the multimedia materials they will need for the specific course. The selected materials are loaded onto the computer(s) of the Self-Access Learning Centre and are available to be used by the students.
The Internet: By connecting the local network computers to the Internet, the user can have access to similar educational networks from all over the world, and/or create a site where from to publish activities and materials to those interested.	

Advantages of the off-line option:
- It limits the number of staff people who spend time operating equipment.
- It increases usage of existing materials.

Advantages of on-line options:
- **Easy to perform change**s in the material (add, delete, change etc).
- Maintenance of the system: **cost effective** (with additions and changes in the material there is no need to prepare new CDs).
- Students can **work from different places,** provided they have access to an on-line computer (if the option of the Internet is selected) – there is no need to be physically present in the Centre.
- Electronic linking through hyperlinks allows students to **share resources** (e.g. activities, exercises, various types of texts etc) **found in another institution** (e.g. a UK or a US university).

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