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REVIEWING THE SCOPE OF LITERACY. A CASE OF SCHOLARLY IDENTITIES

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Abstract. *Literacy as a term has been approached and measured by many disciplines. Literacy has undergone many recent transformations with the emergence of the new technologies which facilitate access to literacy by many cultures previously dissociated from traditional reading and writing activities. The article gives an overview of the most recent research in this area, and looks at the re-invention of the university literacy concept which is tightly associated with the English language literacy. A case study of applicants' essays for the doctoral study programme at Mykolas Romeris University is presented as a sample of literacy issues in the learning environment.*

Keywords: *literacy, new media literacy, essay, argument, affiliation.*

Introduction

Literacy is a concept that has diverse interpretations in social life of individuals, cultures and nations. Dictionary explanation of literacy though frowned upon by some researchers (e.g. Barton, 2007) as not adequate to understanding the full complexity of the concept is “the ability to read and write” (Online dictionary.com based on the Random House Dictionary, Random House, Inc. 2011; Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition 2009).

However, nowadays the scholarly understanding of literacy exceeds by far the identification with the two abilities, or, rather, the questioning of these abilities yields so many levels of ideological, political, social, psychological, technological, semiotic, linguistic and other approaches that the very concept of literacy is for convenience and clarity sake divided into multiple literacies. Politically, literacy is often the subject of the public contract, as, for example, the contract between the employers and the higher education institutions. To illustrate this position it might be useful to read the recent Flash EuroBarometer No 304 (fieldwork August–September 2010) which has indicated that in terms of “very or rather important skills” in university graduates characteristics the recruiting officers of small and medium sized European companies indicated computer literacy 98%, and first-class ability in reading/writing 58-62%¹. The satisfaction with the university graduates skills in these areas varied: with graduate computer skills 38% of employers were very satisfied, 39% in Lithuania, and with graduates reading and writing skills very satisfied were 33% employers, for Lithuania this was 14 %² which placed Lithuania second from the end leaving French employers even less enthusiastic about university graduates’ reading and writing skills.

Ideologically, literacy is a field of practice, which in many instances draws the dividing line between elite³ and mass experiences or “the old” and “the new” literacies, which could be explained as “different identities, understandings and habits of meaning making”⁴.

Technology opens a vast majority of literacy exercise. Corbel sees literacy as an endless process of extending repertoire of text types and genres and computer literacy as an extension of that repertoire⁵. Rassool, in fact, calls this quality of the literacy multidimensionality⁶ and lists the following aspects of the 21st century literacies: internet literacies, digital literacies, new media literacies, multiliteracies, information literacy, ICT literacies, computer literacy.

1 European Commission. Analytical Report. Flash EB No 304 [interactive]. [accessed 12-02-2011]. <http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_304_en.pdf>, p. 14.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 26–27.

3 Kress, G. *Literacy in the New Media Age*. Oxon: Routledge, 2003, p. 6.

4 Hyland, K. Writing the university: education, knowledge and reputation. *Language teaching*. 2010, p. 2.

5 Corbel, C. *Computer literacy. Working effectively with electronic texts*. Sydney: National Center for Teaching and Research. 1997, p. 91–95.

6 Rassool, N. Literacy: In search of Paradigm. In *Understanding Difficulties in Literacy Development Issues and Concepts*. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2009, p. 7–32.

New Media Literacy project conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology conceptualized 12 skills indicative of such literacy⁷: play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, negotiation, and visualization. In this approach new media literacy is measured as the behavioural shift conditioned by the technology applications to daily activity. Changed behaviour is due and also leads to acquisition of new experiences in new fields and these new experiences stimulate identity, through participation in a range of practices in different domains⁸ as is shown in Figure.

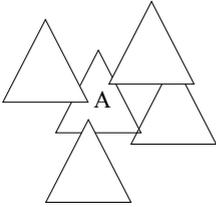


Figure. Identity is networked through participation in a range of practices in different domains (from Ivanič, 2006)

In her approach to the identity change Ivanič states that: discursal re-construction of identity is part and parcel of the learning process together with “an increase in knowledge, understanding and capability”⁹. In other words, the greater aim of literacy is not just providing ability to be literate but to be able to re-construct oneself in the new literate identity.

And although in all the above fields, which make a far from complete list of subjects that address literacy, different research methodologies apply and different definitions of literacy stand out, the aim of this article will be the approach to literacy in the learning context.

1. Tertiary Level Literacy Features

Literacy research has established the divide in interests of literacy in university and non- university education. The divide is partly determined by the diversity of methodologies and partly by the traditional division of elite and mass literacies. Kress states that in the Anglophone world the range of meanings of literacy may come to the high end of being able to read the texts of the elite¹⁰. This division is highlighted by Ken Hyland in his approach to university literacy as “ embedded in the beliefs and practices of individual disciplines, instead of a generic skill that students have failed to develop at school, helps explain the difficulties both students and academics have in controlling the conventions and disciplinary discourses”¹¹. The disciplinary requirements have been sometimes translated into genre specific learning, sometimes they are approached under professional language learning¹².

7 Jenkins, H., et al. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* [interactive]. Chicago: The MacArthur Foundation, 2006, p. 4 [accessed 12-02-2011]. <<http://newmedia-literacies.org/files/working/NMLWhitePaper.pdf>>.

8 Ivanič, R. *Language, learning and identification*. Lancaster: Lancaster Literacy Research Center, 2006, p. 20.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Kress, G., *supra* note 3, p. 22.

11 Hyland, K., *supra* note 4, p. 2.

12 Barton, D. *Literacy. An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Malden: Blakwell Publishing, 2007.

For the university life world wide, the most important meaning making medium has become the English language. Firstly, because of the technological devices and their typographic features such as: ASC –American Standard Code for Information Interchange and Unicode Standard¹³ which are specifically geared for the English alphabet and make the English language particularly widely applicable because of the ease with which the devices yield to spelling or texting the messages. And the second relevant feature to the academic language formation is that English has emerged as the international language of research and academic publishing. More than 70% of the journal literature in Thompson Reuter Master Journal List are published in English¹⁴.

Therefore, the aim of the current article is to look at the English writing skills as demonstrated by the doctoral programme applicants, potential writers to scientific journals, to Mykolas Romeris University 2010 in the written essay of the introductory English language examination.

The methods used were argument building analysis and argument discourse analysis.

2. A Case of Scholarly Identities

The participants, who by the Resolution No 561 of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 12 05 2010 may publish their doctoral theses in Lithuanian or any other foreign language, are required by most universities in Lithuania, as well as in Mykolas Romeris University to participate actively in international scientific events and to publish their research outside Lithuania as well. This requirement is reinforced by the selection procedure at the university and by the English language examination which consists of testing spoken, listening, reading and writing skills of the applicants. The focus of the examination is on the academic literacy of the prospective doctoral students and for this purpose the students are asked to show their skill in writing an essay which is further filed along with other documents of individual record and may always be attested as a proof of the candidates ability to produce academic English.

For the purpose of academic literacy and academic identity analysis the sample essays of the applicants have been examined. The essays were measured by two parameters: argument forming patterns and academic identity forming patterns.

The essays were given a stimulus statement, a time limit of 30 minutes for writing an essay was set and upon completion the essays were graded together with the other parts of the test. The writings were non-field related compositions in response to a causal stimulus argument: „*Both the development of technological tools and the uses to which humanity has put them have created modern civilization in which loneliness is increasing.*“

Argument formation is important for all research articles. Apart from Aristotelian rules the most popular argument structure scheme has become Toulmin's¹⁵ model of ar-

13 Danet, B.; Herring, S. Multilingualism on the Internet. *Handbook of Language Communication- diversity and change*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter, 2010, p. 559.

14 Hyland, K., *supra* note 4, p. 2.

15 *Toulmin's argument model* [interactive]. Syque Consulting and Publishing Limited, 2011 [accessed 12-02-2011]. <http://changingminds.org/disciplines/argument/making_argument/toulmin.htm>.

gument structure which includes six elements: claim, data (grounds, reasons, evidence), warrant, backing, rebuttal and qualifier. The first three elements – claim, data and warrant – are identified by Toulmin as essential parts of any argument. The author understands claim as the statement which is the conclusion of the argument. Data or grounds, reasons, evidence, is described by Toulmin as any information which supports the claim. And warrant is identified as assumption on which the claim and the data depend, i.e. the warrant explains why the data supports the claim. However, in many types of writing and in many cultures of writing the assumptions are not stated directly. The fact that the strength of the argument is in the warrant, therefore, should be always interpreted that the argument may have a claim to be strong as long as it includes a warrant. Backing, rebuttal and qualifier are the elements which can support the warrant and strengthen or weaken the scope of the claim.

The grading rubrics did not specifically target at weighing the argument writing skills, but were adjusted to the convenience of the evaluators college. Tamošiūnienė and Darginavičienė¹⁶ looked into the essays that were written by the applicants and which were evaluated the highest and the lowest score in the Organisation section of Jacobs, Hartflel, Hughey, and Wormuth's scoring matrix¹⁷. Organization rubric was cut into four levels corresponding to the evaluation: Excellent to very good: fluent expression, ideas clearly stated/supported, succinct, well-organized, logical sequencing, cohesive; Good to average: somewhat choppy, loosely organized but main ideas stand out, limited support, logical but incomplete sequencing; Fair to poor: non-fluent, ideas confused or disconnected, lacks logical sequencing and development; Very poor: does not communicate, no organization, or not enough to evaluate. The modification to Jacobs, Hartflel, Hughey, and Wormuth scoring matrix was made for the purpose of convenience and for establishing some sort of the graders community uniformity. The modification was in reducing the scoring grades from 20 to 4 points as the highest degree; each lower grade was reduced by 1 score: 3, 2, 1. Tamošiūnienė and Darginavičienė measured five essays, which were given lower grades for organisation (1-2) and two essays that were given the highest grade (4) for organisation. The schematic identification of the argument construction patterns (Tamošiūnienė, Darginavičienė 2010) allowed to come to the following conclusions: 1. The study of seven essays revealed how the applicants use the strategies of argument forming and the difference in the use of these strategies between essays that received lower and highest grades. 2. The strategies for argument forming in the essays that were graded lower marks were the following: the stimulus grounds were generally modified; claims were separated; as a rule, the new argument claims were associated with only one of the two stimulus claims; stimulus data and claim were switched places in writing a new argument. 3. The strategies for argument forming in the essays that were graded the highest mark were the following: the argument claims

16 Darginavičienė, I.; Tamošiūnienė, L. Argument forming schemes in doctoral programme applicants' essays. In *Specialybės kalba: sakinyis ir tekstas: mokslinių straipsnių rinkinys*. Vilnius: Mykolo Romerio universitetas. Humanitarinių mokslų institutas, 2010, p. 62–69.

17 Holly, L.; Jacobs, V.; Hartflel, F.; Hughey, J. B.; Wormuth, D. R. *ESL Composition Profile*. Newbury House Publisher, 1981.

were less directly associated with the stimulus; the new arguments contained rebuttal; warrants were explicitly stated.

For academic identity analysis the interpreting of the above essay arguments by application of the discourse analysis was carried out. The comparison of the discourse codes showed that some applicants were bringing into the discourse purely objective 'scientific' concepts, yet others preferred providing empirical evidence for interpreting stimulus claims. The comparison can be seen in Table.

Table. Applicants' argument sample comparison to the stimulus claims

| No | Applicants' opening statement of the essay and over all evaluation | The stimulus |
|----|--|---|
| 1 | „The aim of this essay is to answer a question or the development of the technological tools and the uses to it influence relation between people and <u>the man is become alone</u> in the modern civilization.“-4 | „Both the development of technological tools and the uses to which humanity has put them <u>have created modern civilization in which loneliness is increasing.</u> “ |
| 2 | „ <u>Actually</u> , the development of technological tools have a <u>big and important impact</u> to modern civilizations “-5 | |
| 3 | „The technology is very important <u>for all people, firms in all the world</u> . For example the internet or the computers. The development of those tools gives the opportunities to make better life and easier life“-8 | |
| 4 | „ The society is developing fast and even then we use more and more modern means of communication in this modern world. <u>A consequence of this that direct human relationship has been changed</u> by mobile phones, computers and other technology. The new means of communication <u>affect man, his life and habits, man becomes loneliness and alienated</u> “-9 | |
| 5 | „First of all I should mention, that this is a very <u>important global problem</u> , especially when we are talking <u>about children involving in playing with technological tools</u> which were developed for better and easier life. But the <u>increase for loneliness is important problem</u> , because people are starting to communicate with a computer, cell phone not with real people.“-8 | |
| 6 | „To begin with, <u>loneliness is common and widespread problem nowadays</u> . Abraham Maslow, the famous psychologist, has postulated that a modern <u>man is a lonely one</u> and I agree with this statement. The use of many recently created technologies has made our life easier and more comfortable, but on the other hand, <u>people spend more time sitting at home, being alone, but not going out with their friends or spending time with their family.</u> “ -14 | |
| 7 | „ <u>personal subjective experience and the environment around it</u> has been ALWAYS in side relationship. However, this interdependent link not always was as we could call it positive. There are <u>two issues</u> which could be discussed at this subject.”-14 | |

The evidence in the above table shows, that the objective, “scientific” manner of negotiating the impersonal stimulus claims (i.e. have created modern civilization in which loneliness is increasing) were attempted by the essay writers whose overall evaluation scored rather low: 5, 8 and 9: a big and important impact; A consequence of this that direct human relationship has been changed; important global problem. These applicants stepped up the non –committal character of the claim by turning it into “an impact”, “consequence” or “problem”, re –establishing the written media domain of causality relations.¹⁸

These examples show a discrepancy between applicants’ literacy level in English and in their discourse affiliation with the objective, “scientific” manner and affiliation with the written media. For applicants whose essays were graded high, 14, the affiliation of this manner poses no controversy: loneliness is common and widespread problem nowadays; personal subjective experience and the environment around. The applicants language score, argument pattern, the “scientific” discourse and the written mode literacy dominance blend naturally into a new English writing scholar identity, commended by the world research literacy tendencies as has been discussed above.

Conclusions

Literacy in the new media age acquires new meanings which in many senses extend the usual understanding of literacy as the ability to read and write. Yet, if analysed in this primary cut literacy reveals deep insights into the essence of learning through discourse identity formation. The overview of a previously carried research into argument formation patterns of the doctoral programme applicants and the review of the affiliation patterns in argument discourse patterns show that:

1. Argument forming patterns differ in accord with the English writing skills of the applicants.

The strategies for argument forming in the essays that were graded lower marks were the following: the stimulus grounds were generally modified; claims were separated; as a rule, the new argument claims were associated with only one of the two stimulus claims; stimulus data and claim were switched places in writing a new argument. Where as the strategies for argument forming in the essays that graded the highest mark were the following: the argument claims were less directly associated with the stimulus; the new arguments contained rebuttal; warrants were explicitly stated.

2. Affiliation patterns in discourse analysis do not show interdependence in the English writing skill and the application of a more „scientific“, objective manner in negotiating impersonal stimulus claims. Both low and high scoring essay writers resorted to objective discourse in essay argument forming.

3. A limited number of essays available for measurement does not allow to apply statistical analysis, to confirm the reliability and validity of the conclusions. However, the analysis forms a valid hypothesis for the extended and longitudinal research.

18 Kress, G., *supra* note 3, p. 4.

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RAŠTINGUMO APMATAI. PAVYZDYS: TYRĖJO TAPATUMAS

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Santrauka. Nors tradiciškai raštingumas siejamas su gebėjimu skaityti ir rašyti, tačiau šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje jis tampa reikšmingu ideologijų, politikos, sociologijos, psichologijos, technologijų, semiotikos ir kitų sričių tyrimo objektu bei nauju šių tyrinėjimo sričių terminu. Akademineje literatūroje pasirodo multiraštingumo arba raštingumų sąvokos. Is-

toriškai raštingumas vis dar klasifikuojamas į elitinį, senąjį raštingumą ir masių, naująjį raštingumą. Tai itin plačiai taikytina anglofonijos šalyse. Kita vertus, anglų kalba technologijų bei žiniatinklio dėka galinga banga išiveržė ir į masių raštingumą, ir į elitinį raštingumą, nes akademinės publikacijos didžia dalimi (70 proc. Thompson Reuters duomenų bazėje kaupiamų mokslo leidinių) rašomos ir spausdinamos angliškai. Todėl akademiniam pasaulyje raštingumą imama suprasti ir kaip gebėjimą skaityti bei rašyti anglų kalba. Šiame straipsnyje atliekama ankstesnio tyrimo (Tamošiūnienė, Darginavičienė, 2010) apžvalga, kurios metu buvo aptariami argumento formavimo būdai anglų kalbos rašiniuose, stojant į Mykolo Romerio universiteto doktorantūrą. Nagrinėjamų rašto darbų analizė parodė, kad žemesniais balais įvertintuose darbuose argumentavimo strategijos ir struktūros skiriasi nuo argumentavimo strategijų ir struktūrų, taikomų aukštais balais įvertintuose darbuose. Šiuose darbuose plačiau naudojami išlygos ir paramos elementai. Tačiau diskurso analizė argumento formavimo strategijose nerodo, jog prastesnių anglų kalbos rašinių autoriai priskirtini menkesnei raštingumo kategorijai. Jų priskirtinumas prie tradicinės raštingumo savybės konstruoti informaciją priežastingumo ašyje nekoreliuoja su bendru žemu rašto darbo įvertinimu. Tyrimo išvados gali būti nelabai pagrįstos ir patikimos, nes tirta nedaug darbų. Tačiau iškeltos hipotezės suformuoja pagrindą platesniems ir longitudinaliems tyrimams.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: raštingumas, naujasis medijų raštingumas, ese, argumentas, bendrumo siekimas.

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