Why we should not be Teaching Academic Writing through the Rhetorical Patterns Approach

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For students in higher education, writing is an obvious challenge. As Bartholomae (1985, p.134) puts it, the student writer's task is nothing less than one of ‘inventing the university’:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion … or a branch of it. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the various discourses of our community. … [A] student … must learn to try on a variety of voices and interpretive schemes – to write, for example, as a literary critic one day and an experimental psychologist the next, to work within fields where the rules governing the presentation of examples or the development of an argument are both distinct and, even to a professional, mysterious.

Clearly then, this kind of writing demands high-level language skills and knowledge, the ability to analyze and organize ideas and arguments across a text, and the awareness and flexibility to deal appropriately with the varying and sometimes opaque register, genre and rhetorical expectations of different academic teachers.

To help students, especially ESOL students, with this challenge, many higher education institutions provide them with EAP or English composition courses, both before and during their academic studies. These courses appear to reflect a fairly strong consensus about what essay writing entails, as can be seen from syllabuses and academic writing course books. These often ask students to learn various rhetorical formulae, such as ‘report,’ ‘position essay,’ ‘cause-effect essay’ and ‘problem-solution essay,’ and organizational elements, such as the ‘thesis statement’ and the ‘topic sentence’. This suggests, at least on the surface, that many teachers, course designers and textbook writers believe that they can teach academic writing through definable and predictable rhetorical and organizational patterns.

However, if Bartholomae’s view of the student writer’s task is valid, then this approach may be misrepresenting the nature and process of academic writing because it seeks to simplify and make regularized and predictable a task that is inherently complex, variable and uncertain. It runs the risk of trying to turn an activity that is deeply social into a decontextualised application of algorithms or heuristics. In this paper, we contend that the rhetorical patterns presented in many EAP courses do not actually exist in any coherent sense in the real world of academia, and that emphasizing and utilizing them when teaching and assessing academic writing can have many negative effects on students' learning by downplaying the contextual, content-based, problem-solving nature of authentic academic writing.

When we have presented these ideas at workshops and conferences (e.g. Davidson & Spring, 2007; Palmer, 2009), we have found them to be surprisingly controversial. While some teachers have expressed agreement with what we were suggesting, others have apparently felt rather threatened by our arguments as if they cast doubt over many fundamental beliefs about teaching academic writing. Indeed, we believe this quite striking difference of opinion amongst teachers suggests there is an important issue to explore here, with quite fundamental implications for academic writing teaching.

In the rest of this paper, we first clarify what we mean by rhetorical patterns. Then, we explain why we believe the concept of rhetorical patterns in essay writing to be problematic. Third, we discuss why many teachers and students like and use these rhetorical patterns. Fourth, we suggest some possible problems with relying too much on these rhetorical patterns and other organizational elements in teaching and assessment. Finally, we offer a more authentic approach to teaching academic writing.
Rhetorical Patterns and Organizational Elements

Rhetorical patterns refers to the organizational structures that many English language teachers assume exist in academic writing, in particular essay writing. For example, such teachers believe there is a clearly definable organizational template for a ‘problem solution’ essay, and that student writers should follow this template to write a good essay. The majority of ELT publishers appear to share this assumption, as most academic writing textbooks are organized and structured around these rhetorical patterns.

While rhetorical patterns organize discourse across the whole essay, organizational elements refer to paragraph and sentence level aspects of essay writing. These include thesis statements, topic sentences and supporting sentences, and elements of introductions and conclusions. Here, we focus primarily on rhetorical patterns, although we believe that the way some teachers and course books use organizational elements in teaching and assessment is also problematic. Palmer (2009), for example, provides detailed criticism of these elements.

Problems with the Concept of Rhetorical Patterns

Davidson and Spring (2008) reports on a search of some academic writing course books and composition course syllabi available on-line. This process was not particularly exhaustive or rigorous. Even so, it identified at least 38 different rhetorical patterns, and we have little doubt that further research would add to this list. The categorization of these essay types seems muddled. There appear to be three types of confusion. Firstly, we need to distinguish between concepts to do with logical relations and rhetorical patterns. For example, the logical relation of cause-effect can be expressed at many levels within and between sentences, and within and between paragraphs, sections, chapters etc. Talking about ‘cause-effect essays,’ for example, oversimplifies this complex and multi-level relationship between the logic of thoughts and the discursive organization of writing. Secondly, while we may be justified in calling ‘cause-effect’ a logical relation, is this true for ‘exemplification’ or ‘definition’? These seem to be functions or purposes, yet course books consider all three as equivalent concepts. It would seem more reasonable to describe cause-effect as one kind of logical relation that writers might invoke at various levels of discourse structure for the purpose of explanation (among other purposes). Thirdly, many of the categories included in the rhetorical pattern approach are operating in parallel. We need a much clearer idea of the hierarchy of categories. For example, it might be argued that there are in fact two very basic academic writing purposes: to neutrally inform (expository, descriptive, etc.) and to persuade (argumentative, persuasive, position etc.). At the same time, if we want to teach our students to think, we might also want to encourage them to consider whether even the most innocently informative writing carries with it various assumptions, intentions and so on that can be a matter of argument. Accepting for the moment these two basic aims, students may then need to think differently about their ‘cause-effect essay’ depending on whether their purpose is to inform or persuade. Yet, from the course books and syllabi that we looked at, it appears that cause-effect and persuasive essays are treated as categories at the same level. The same problems can be seen for many of the other ‘patterns’: exemplification, illustration, definition can occur in all kinds of combinations at many different discourse levels (sentence, paragraph etc.).

Clearly then, in academic writing the finished text may well reflect a complex mixture of these supposed patterns, not just one. For example, a report about solving traffic problems may well need a section explaining causes and effects of various problems, and a section to evaluate their seriousness. Then it may need to have a section comparing and contrasting the effects of various possible solutions, and so on. In fact, writing course books perhaps acknowledge this by offering templates for different types of paragraph as well as essay types. However, this simply creates the problem discussed here at a lower level of organization.
These conceptual problems are possibly one of the reasons for the noticeable inconsistencies in the lists of rhetorical patterns across different sources. The list of 38 that we compiled was an aggregate of widely differing lists from individual syllabi and course books. In our earlier paper, we looked at this range more closely from 10 academic writing course books that were available in the resource room of a university EFL department. We found a striking level of inconsistency, with only one pattern (compare-contrast) appearing in all 10 course books, and no two books agreeing on the list of patterns. We also found instances of the conceptual confusions in choices of patterns discussed earlier.

These inconsistencies should lead us to question the empirical basis for these patterns. Presumably, if there were agreed categories of essay, this would be on the basis of some sound research that had identified the different rhetorical patterns in representative samples of writing that was authentic (that is, written for academic higher education courses, not EAP courses). Whilst there has of course been much empirical and theoretical research about discourse structures in academic writing (especially in the tradition of Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, such as Halliday and Hasan, 1976, 1985; Martin, 1992), as far as we are aware, it has never produced the kinds of lists of simple rhetorical patterns seen in the content pages of these course books.

It is only recently that writing teachers and researchers have begun to develop corpora of student essays set up with the aim of collecting a representative sample of different kinds of student writing in a range of different academic disciplines (e.g. Nesi, Sharpling, & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004). Hopefully, systematic discourse analysis of this academic writing will provide information for teachers and students equivalent to that provided to academic vocabulary teaching by the academic word list corpus work (e.g. Coxhead, 2000). At the very least, if previous corpus linguistic research is anything to go by, we can expect many of our intuitions to be overturned.

A parallel descriptive approach has been to study what writing tasks academic teachers really set their students across the different disciplines (see, for example, Paltridge, 2004 or Zhu, 2004). These have produced inconsistent results that do not strongly suggest that the rhetorical patterns presented in EAP course books fit to actual academic writing tasks. In an informal survey of actual university essay topics, Palmer (2009) found that almost all of the topics appeared to require students to use all of the six rhetorical patterns that he identified as the most commonly taught in academic writing courses. We do not know whether academic teachers themselves think in terms of rhetorical patterns when setting writing tasks. However, we strongly suspect that they do not – unless perhaps their thinking has been affected by exposure to 101 Composition or EAP writing classes. These problems with the descriptive basis of rhetorical patterns help explain our findings about the number and inconsistency of forms across course books and syllabi: to the extent that these rhetorical patterns are descriptive, they are based on intuition or on limited and unrepresentative evidence.

Given this, one might wonder where exactly these rhetorical patterns came from. First, there is a long tradition (going back to ancient Greece) of setting out idealized forms of rhetoric. Also, the rhetorical patterns approach in EAP sometimes feels equivalent to the artificial attempts to prescribe grammatical correctness in English in terms of ‘ideal’ Roman or Greek grammar. Second, they may well be elaborations of the famous ‘forms of composition’ (Narration, Description, Exposition, Argument) laid down magisterially in 1917 for generations of American college teachers by Henry Wyman Holmes, dean of education at Harvard (Holmes, 1917/2007). The modern elaborations of these ‘forms of composition’ appear to reflect attempts to provide labels for essay tasks, such as comparing and contrasting, that do not fit easily within any of Holmes’s categories. Finally, this prescriptiveness may also be a consequence of the didactic approach to writing in some school systems – the ‘four paragraph essay’, for example. This didactic approach can also spawn overly prescriptive models of writing that fail to teach students to respond flexibly and thoughtfully to tasks.

The end result is that the rhetorical patterns approach has become prescriptive in the sense
that its practitioners have unjustifiably tried to generalize from very limited evidence in order to claim that all essays should be organized according to certain rhetorical patterns. The approach has therefore become a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, teachers claim that essay tasks actually require answers using these rhetorical patterns. Therefore, they teach students to interpret and respond to essay tasks by using these rhetorical patterns, and students are taught and tested only on essay tasks that clearly require these patterns. In EAP course books, for example, readings and model essays are generally selected because they illustrate these patterns, rather than because they are representative of academic reading and writing.

Why Rhetorical Patterns are Liked and Used by Students and Teachers

While conducting the small survey discussed above, we found just one course book (Leki, 1989) that was not organized around rhetorical patterns. Given that there are serious conceptual and empirical concerns about such patterns, it is surprising that this approach has remained dominant in EAP teaching for so long. Indeed, even twenty years ago, the approach was already subject to criticism by various scholars (e.g. Spack, 1988; Silva, 1990; Raimes, 1991). Thus, it is important to consider why the rhetorical pattern approach is still popular today, especially as we wish to argue that it is misguided.

Our assumption is that this approach is attractive to students primarily because it promises simplicity and predictability. This is particularly true when the students come from secondary education systems that did not give students experience of academic writing. If students are able to look at any essay prompt and respond to it by following one of a limited number of organizational formulae or templates, then a major part of their task is made much simpler and more predictable: there may simply be a set of ‘gaps’ that they need to fill with relevant content for that particular essay. The need to analyze the essay prompt and work out yet another unique rhetorical organization for that particular writing task is thus avoided. Students then focus on memorizing the transitional devices that are thought to be appropriate for that particular rhetorical pattern. For example, with a compare and contrast essay, students would learn ‘in contrast,’ ‘on the other hand,’ ‘similarly’ etc. Looked at positively, we can say this is a good thing because it frees the student to concentrate on developing other aspects of the essay to a higher standard, such as content or language accuracy.

This approach offers a similar attraction to teachers because their job is clearer if they can develop their EAP writing syllabi around explicit stageable and limited objectives defined by the various rhetorical patterns. Such syllabi undeniably have a clear internal coherence, and this is what we can see in many EAP writing textbooks. Sometimes these textbooks offer primarily essay level templates, sometimes paragraph level ones, or perhaps both. One might argue that a clearly structured syllabus will help teachers to teach and students to learn. Both students and teachers know where they are going and why, which can be particularly helpful when this kind of essay writing is unfamiliar. In conversations and workshops with EAP teachers in EFL contexts, we often hear teachers claiming that once these basic patterns have been learnt, more complicated writing tasks can be given.

Why the Rhetorical Patterns Approach may be Harmful

As we have already acknowledged, EFL and ESL students arriving in higher education with little or no prior experience of writing ‘western-style’ academic essays clearly need a lot of support. For such students, making the writing task simpler and more predictable through rhetorical patterns would seem like a reasonable strategy. Nevertheless, we believe there are also significant dangers in following this approach.

Our first concern is that while EAP courses may be internally coherent, they have become
increasingly divorced from the reality of academic writing in higher education. We contend that such rhetorical patterns, certainly in the pure forms they are often presented, do not actually exist in the real world of academia. The writing tasks that academic instructors set students are not (consciously) based on such patterns, but rather on the ideas, arguments, etc. that the instructor wishes students to express. For sure, authentic writing tasks regularly contain words like ‘cause,’ ‘effect,’ ‘problem’ and so on. However, we do not believe these terms are used in the consistent way that the rhetorical patterns approach implies. Thus, there is no reason to expect students’ responses to fit neatly into distinct templates. In this case, we are not clarifying the task for students; we are actively misleading them. We regularly see the harmful effect of this when students try to make an essay task ‘fit’ one of the rhetorical patterns they have learned, or misread the question because the sight of particular words (‘cause,’ ‘problem’ etc) triggers a template-based answer. Evidence for this includes both essays which fail to answer the question set, and the thinking revealed in their questions to us: ‘Is this a compare-contrast essay or a cause effect essay?’ or ‘Do I have to write four paragraphs?’ In short, the rhetorical patterns approach risks misleading students about the complexity and unpredictability of discourse structures in academic writing.

Our second concern is that this approach would still be unhelpful even if it were true that real academic writing could be neatly categorised into identifiable rhetorical patterns. This is because the approach implies that academic essay writing is largely a matter of pattern-matching. That is, it suggests the following strategy to students: look at the writing task for clues about rhetorical patterns; recall the rhetorical pattern that fits most closely; fill in the ‘gaps’ in the organization with relevant information and argument; sprinkle on some of the linking words associated with the pattern. To us, this attempts to avoid one of the key purposes of academic writing: to demonstrate the ability to think critically. Part of that thinking process involves analyzing a unique writing prompt in order to work out how best to organize the answer. In this regard, it is interesting to see that guidance for students coming from within academic disciplines tends to follow this latter approach. For example, Martinich (1996) offers writing advice for philosophy students without mentioning any of the rhetorical patterns and organizational elements so common in EAP course books. Instead, his focus is on building each essay in terms of the arguments necessary on that particular occasion in response to that particular writing prompt. Like Martinich, we believe that the writing of an academic essay should not be reduced to pattern-matching because it ignores the fact that the organization should reflect the student’s own thinking and response to the task and the recursive nature of writing. Whilst many students may well produce similar organizational patterns for a particular task, they will have arrived at that consensus through having had to think it out for themselves. If our aim is to develop students into independent academic writers, then it seems reasonable that our EAP courses must teach students to think creatively for themselves so that they can analyze and respond appropriately to more ambiguous and complex writing tasks without our support. Teaching students to follow rhetorical patterns seems wrong in principle because it does not empower them to think for themselves. Rather, it teaches them to follow a prescribed, and often contrived, template. Instead, EAP teachers need to make students aware that writing is a recursive process that develops and changes as the writer engages in the process of analysing the prompt and planning and revising their response to it (Johns, 1986).

The arguments made so far also relate to quite fundamental issues underlying learning, that parallel the debates about acquiring or learning the grammar rules of a language. While there is not space to present these issues in detail, it is worth outlining them (albeit crudely) to provoke some thought about our personal theories of learning that lie behind our choices as teachers of academic writing. The rhetorical patterns approach seems to rely on an information processing account of learning (see Newell & Simon, 1972). According to such a view, knowledge about academic writing is deliberately learned and stored in a propositional form; that is, as rules. In planning to write, an executive ‘processor’ consciously draws on these rules, together with other data relevant to the task to formulate the organizational structure of the writing. Another
assumption of this approach is that these rules can (or should) be taught explicitly to the learner, who then memorizes them and draws on them explicitly while writing.

The information processing account has, however, come under increasing criticism from connectionist accounts (Dienes & Perner, 1999). The connectionists argue that knowledge, such as rules about essay structure, can in fact be stored as weighted connections representing information, examples, memories etc. in a neural or computer network. In this account, you cannot find rules stored in a discrete location as propositions to read. Rather, they are represented in a dispersed form by the current state of various parts of the network. This implies that learning of rules can (or should) take place by the mind abstracting rules from experience of exemplars – in this case, a variety of writing tasks. Moreover, this process does not have to (or should not) be conscious, deliberate or guided explicitly by a teacher. Through modelling learning as a gradualistic and dispersed activity across a network, connectionists have been able to account for data from learning experiments that psychologists had previously argued could only be explained through an information processing approach.

Researchers and theorists continue to debate the merits of these two views of learning, and it seems likely that, to some extent both are applicable to the human mind. In particular, the conscious executive ability of reflecting before, during and after trying to solve a problem seems particularly relevant to academic writing. However, connectionism certainly reminds us of our ability to abstract and apply rules to deal with new situations without even realizing it. From discussions with teachers, we find that many of us did indeed learn to be successful academic writers in this way. That is, we were never taught explicit rules of rhetorical patterns and organizational elements. Thus, at the very least, there is a choice about how to teach academic writing. Later though, we will explain why we think that teaching academic writing from a connectionist stance is better.

Our final concern with the rhetorical patterns approach is that it ignores the implications of Bartholomae’s argument, with which we began this paper. That is, it suggests that students can apply fairly stable and clear strategies and rules to a writing task in isolation, without considering the social context. However, writing is obviously a performance for a certain audience by a performer in a certain context, partly defined by the relative statuses of audience and performer and the overt and hidden purposes of the performance. Systemic functional linguistics offers a valuable perspective on this (Halliday, 1994), with its reminder that all text carries an interpersonal metafunction that expresses the relationships and purposes of writers and readers. Bartholomae also notes that student academic writing takes place within various academic discourse communities that can have radically different approaches to and criteria for argument, evidence, rhetorical structure etc (Donald, 2002). These points tend to be given inadequate attention by the rhetorical patterns approach, which thus underplays the amount of mindful negotiation involved in successful academic writing. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Metternich’s book on student philosophy writing begins with a chapter-long discussion of audience and writer’s persona.

In terms of the writing product, students sometimes grossly fail to respond to the actual task because they have learned that there are rules of organization that can (or even must) be applied rigidly. Thus, a complex essay question can be reduced in the student’s mind to a stereotyped compare-contrast structure that actually prevents the student from really answering the question. In terms of the writing process, because of the way they are taught EAP writing, these students may not realize that each writing task is in some way unique, both rhetorically and socially, and has to be treated as such: a new discursive problem to solve intelligently, by analysis and application of previous experience. One implication of connectionism is that students may be better able to structure their writing if they do not think about organization in the rule-based manner required by the rhetorical patterns approach. We will consider the question of what they might focus on instead in the following section.

In passing, we should acknowledge that while we question some aspects of the rhetorical approach in principle, some of our arguments can of course be questioned on the same grounds.
as we criticized the rhetorical pattern approach earlier. That is, do our views here have descriptive validity, or are they just reflecting our unrepresentative personal experience of academic study and teaching? Is our view unjustifiably prescriptive, in just promoting our personal understanding of the aims and techniques of academic essay writing? Of course, we think we are right and that further research will support us. However, this still needs to be carried out systematically. Put another way, as teachers, we should not be designing EAP writing courses without conducting proper needs analyses in the institutions that we work in, so as to discover what writing tasks are really required, and what kinds of academic thinking content instructors actually want from their students. At the same time, we might want to challenge those existing requirements, as themselves being inadequately thoughtout.

Alternatives to Formulaic Approaches to Academic Writing

As should be clear from the preceding sections, we believe the rhetorical pattern approach is due some severe criticism. In addition, we think that there are better ways to teach academic writing, both for EAP and first-language students. However, like any view of teaching, our view presupposes a position on what the aim of academic writing should be, so we need to make this clear first.

Our position is that students should be doing academic writing primarily because it helps them to learn to think well about the subject they are learning. The extensive literature on deep and surface learning in higher education strongly suggests that writing (in all disciplines) is an effective way to encourage and assess thinking and deep learning (Ramsden, 1992). Whilst academic writing can effectively test students’ knowledge of a subject, it is a wasted opportunity if writing tasks do not also encourage students to demonstrate good thinking and argumentation. We also assume that academic instructors set their writing tasks without the slightest regard to the concept of rhetorical patterns. That is, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find university lecturers wondering whether to set a cause-effect or an illustration essay. Rather, they set writing tasks according to the academic objectives and content of their courses. This means, as we have already pointed out, that EAP teachers should not expect authentic writing tasks to conform to any limited set of rhetorical patterns.

The two main implications of this position are:

1. students need to learn to deal with writing tasks that cannot be done successfully without thinking well in a way appropriate to their disciplinary context, and
2. students need to learn to flexibly and thoughtfully approach each writing task as a unique multidimensional problem that requires a unique solution (although of course, they will be able to draw on their prior experience of more or less similar problems).

Regarding the first implication, if we want students to think and argue well, we need to give them interesting topics to think and argue about. One problem with the rhetorical pattern approach that we already referred to is that the topics and readings are selected primarily in order to match the pattern, rather than because they are worth studying. Of course, they sometimes are interesting, but it seems better to select all topics and readings because they will interest and challenge students to think and argue. Whether a reading happens to follow some organizational structure should be completely irrelevant. In addition, following Bartholomae (1985) and Donald (2002), we need to expose students to authentic examples of modes of argument from the discourse communities in which we would like them to participate. Finally, we need to inculcate academic mindfulness, so that students learn to think about their thinking, to monitor their own problem-solving processes.

Regarding the second implication, any pre-specification of writing tasks needs to be kept as broad and flexible as possible within the constraints of the course and institutional context. For
example, the requirement could be merely for essays that are within certain lengths and are argument-led (i.e. trying to support a claim in response to the writing prompt). What we should definitely not do is to pre-define writing tasks in terms of rhetorical patterns. Instead, the actual essay tasks need to arise naturally out of the readings and discussions that take place during the course. There should probably also be a choice of writing prompts, especially if the topics and readings produce widely differing views among the students. Students should also be given the opportunity to create their own writing prompts, especially if they are writing persuasively. This will undoubtedly create some new challenges for course design and management in multi-section courses.

This approach will also have a radical effect on the way teachers and students talk about planning and writing. Quite probably, nobody will need to ever mention any of the rhetorical patterns. It will simply not make sense for a student to ask ‘What kind of essay is this?’ For an argumentative essay, instead of filling in the gaps in some organizational template, students will need to do things like analyze the question and the assumptions behind the question, think through their own position and the positions they will need to challenge and defend, work out how to organize their writing to present their position most effectively. The teacher still supports the learning, but the ‘scaffolding’ is not in the form of model outlines and essays, but rather in form of questioning and feedback. In other words, the writing process will shift from being ‘form-driven’ to being ‘content-driven’ (Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson, & Reddy, 2006).

This may well require more time and effort, and it may well be frustrating for students to find that they have to plan from scratch for the next writing task. However, experiencing this problem-solving process seems much more likely to prepare them to deal flexibly and thoughtfully with future writing tasks by themselves, and better reflects the recursive nature of the academic writing process. If it fails to reduce the complexity of academic writing, then so be it. Perhaps we simply have to accept that there is quite a high threshold level of language and academic skills for learning academic writing. Trying to teach students below this threshold level entails distorting the nature of the skill, and therefore students mislearn the skill. This means they have to unlearn before being able to proceed to the sophisticated understanding of academic writing that we are actually aiming for.

We have described this alternative approach to teaching academic writing in somewhat general terms, but in fact it is an approach that is being successfully used already: content-based instruction (CBI) and sustained content-based instruction (Stoller, 2004; Pally, 1997, 2001; Spring, in press). There are many varieties of CBI, but in simple terms, in this approach, the teacher organizes an EAP course around one or more particular topics with the aim of exploring these topics in depth. Academic language objectives are addressed within this framework, rather than the other way round. As a result, it can seem as if much of the course focuses explicitly on the content rather than on academic language and skills. For us, this is actually a strength of CBI because the structure of the writing will emerge as a consequence of attempts to argue, rather than what from what can be fitted into a prescribed rhetorical template. Evaluation of CBI courses suggests that students can indeed successfully develop their academic language and skills through this approach, for reasons that we have tried to explain by outlining the connectionist view of learning.

Conclusion

CBI undoubtedly contains its own difficulties, in particular the challenge for EAP teachers (who may not be experts in that discipline) of helping students engage with course content in academically authentic ways. However, it seems reasonable to claim that it is precisely by engaging students in what they are trying to say that we can best motivate them to search for the most effective ways of organizing and expressing their ideas in writing.

For us, academic writing is a sociolinguistic activity that, if it is to be authentic, is intrinsically
and irreducibly complex and ambiguous. For this reason, EAP teachers should not pretend to students that this difficult task can be neatly and generically simplified in the way that the rhetorical patterns approach tries to. As argued in this paper, we strongly believe, on both empirical and theoretical grounds, that attempting to reduce the complexities of academic writing to set formulae misleads students and therefore does not give them the grounding that they need in order to prosper as thoughtful, independent academic writers. It does not help them become “able to adapt to diverse rhetorical situations as their purposes for writing and the readers they hope to reach change” (Belcher & Liu, 2004, p.3).

References


