

ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

“Options, Practices and Possibilities of EAP and ESP practitioners”

UNIVERSITY OF CRETE

The Implications of Academic Writing in English at the Graduate Level for Scientific Publication

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INTRODUCTION

- Academic writing can be defined as the type of writing required for undergraduate or graduate studies, for thesis writing, for grant applications and for scientific publication.
- Academic writing for scientific publication belongs to a specific discursive genre which aims to participate in an academic discussion engaged in the building up of knowledge in a specific field of study.
- Genre are “staged, goal-oriented social processes through which social subjects in a given culture live their lives”. (Martin-Martin, 2008, p. 13)
- The world of scientific publications is dominated by the English Language (Ammon, 2007), and has grown from 66 percent in the 1980s to 89 percent at the end of the 20th century (Martel, 2001). Hamel (2007) claims that such increase is leading towards an English monoculturalism in scientific publication.

- Scientific publication is nowadays not only restricted to scholars, but also requested to graduate students, many of whom – specially doctoral ones – need at least one publication in an international well-known peer-reviewed journal to get their degree.
- However, both scholars and students, specially those with an academic writing background in a language other than English, face difficulties whilst writing in English for publication purposes (Flowerdew, 2008; Hanauer & Englander, 2009; Salager-Meyer, 2008).

BACKGROUND

- Due to the increasing need for graduate students to publish scientific papers for graduation purposes, UNAM started offering academic writing courses (hereafter AWC) in 2011.
- In 2017, UNAM offered two intensive AWC for scientific publication to graduate students.
- Characteristics of the course:
 - 3 week-course and workshop (daily from 9 to 6pm)
 - Students have to submit a draft of their “final” version of paper
 - Students have to write a motivation letter in English and participate in an interview demonstrating at least a B2 level
 - Courses are free and students need to sign a commitment letter
- In fall 2017, 65 students from a wide range of academic disciplines registered for the course.

AIM OF THE STUDY

- To investigate the needs, practices and perceptions of postgraduate students that take an AWC for scientific publication at UNAM.

METHODS

STUDY

Exploratory and qualitative study

SAMPLE

20 graduate students enrolled in the AWC

INSTRUMENT

Semistructured interview conducted during the first week of the course.

INTERVIEWERS

3 scholars participating in this research project

DATA ANALYSIS

Nvivo version 12. Two coders participating in this research project, and group sessions between four scholars.

RESULTS

IDENTIFIED CATEGORIES

1. Writing knowledge prior to the AWC
2. Criteria used to select a journal
3. Opinion and expectations of the AWC
4. Feedback of the manuscript received
5. Actions that would help students to write better
6. Actions that UNAM and the graduate unit should take to develop students writing skills
7. Writing process
8. Feeling towards writing in English
9. Emerging categories

1. Writing knowledge prior to taking the course

- 2nd or 3rd publications
- Other writing courses
- Watching youtube tutorials to improve grammar

2. Criteria to select the journal

- Consensus with the supervisor
- Well-known journals with a high impact factor
- Looking at their own references
- While reading the literature of own work
- Wider audience and citations
- Indexed journals
- Journals related to the study conducted
- Through a research network or previous conference
- Response time of the journal
- Journals that do not charge or very little
- Previous contact with the journal

3a. Positive opinions towards the course

- Acquisition of writing techniques, strategies and tips.
- Allocation of time (two weeks for a workshops and one week for a one-to-one review)
- It should be mandatory for all graduate students.
- Enriching course that deepens and explains in detail all the sections commonly included in a scientific paper.
- Good for understanding what anglophone readers expect in terms of the progression and structure of a paper.
- Course of great value because “you move from an empirical way of writing to a more structured way of doing it. I didn’t know that journals follow a specific structure for their papers”.
- Personal feedback and help in developing the paper

3b. Negative opinions towards the course

- Peers should ideally come from the same field of study or graduate academic program – internal feedback.
- The course should target not students that are finishing their PhD but those who are in the middle and that know the aim of their research. Specially in the humanities where publications can take up to 18 months.
- A short course is not enough and it should target a larger graduate population and not only 60 or 70 students.
- It should be less hours a day and longer than three weeks.

3c. Course expectations

- To be able to publish in English and to continue doing so.
- To accomplish a refined and well-structured version of the paper.
- To develop a paper that is not only well-structured but that is also rich in content and attractive to the target audience.
- To end the course with a paper ready or almost ready for submission to a journal.
- To learn how to write scientific papers in a more professional manner.
- To be able to understand the idiosyncrasy of anglophone readers.
- To have a clear idea of how to organize a scientific paper.
- To acquire the strategies to make writing smoother and easier.
- To develop writing skills that allow easier encounters with thesis supervisor.
- To acquire lots of practice.
- To improve English and to be able to identify own mistakes.
- To be able to write without showing that “I am a Latino”.

4. Feedback given to the paper

A) With the supervisor

- Before the AWC or for the AWC.
- Important guide.
- Development of important ideas throughout the paper.
- Specific feedback related to the content and technical vocabulary due to the experience in the field and in publishing.
- Help to analyze and interpret the results.
- No feedback because the supervisor is too busy or because the student prefers to present it after the course.
- Some tutors do not write in English, thus they cannot give feedback.

B) During the AWC

- General writing rules, strategies, tips and advices.

C) Third parties

- Friends, family and partners (native and non-native English speakers)
- Classmates

5. Actions that would help students to write better

A) Feedback:

- To have an English native speaker reader.
- Peer review.
- Feedback from instructors and friends.
- Readers from the same field of study.

B) Courses:

- Work at the paragraph level instead of grammar exercises.
- To have more writing and English courses.
- To improve the Spanish writing first.
- To have mandatory writing courses.

C) Other:

- Own development of writing skills.
- Practice in writing papers directly in English instead of departing from a thesis written in Spanish.
- To carry on sending manuscripts in English to journals.
- To have testimonials from other students that took the course and managed to publish.

6. Actions that UNAM and the graduate unit should take to develop students writing skills

- Each school should implement and develop their own AWC.
- Promotion and information of the course during the early stages of the graduate studies.
- Mandatory AWC in Spanish and English.
- Optional AWC and workshops for those who wish to polish more their writing techniques.
- No more publication of thesis, but instead research papers.
- Train also students who took the course to become trainers of AWC in Spanish and English.
- The AWC should be more accessible for students.
- Thesis supervisors should encourage students to publish in English.
- It would help if scholars taught their courses in English.

7. WRITING PROCESS

- a) Difficulties with the general structure of the paper
- b) Difficulties with the language
- c) Writing strategies
- d) Language in which the draft was originally written
- e) Writing resources used to write the draft

7.1 Writing process (general structure)

- Structure following the conventional order of a paper: introduction, literature review, hypothesis, methodology, results, discussion and references.
- Followed APA's manual.
- Ideas extracted from thesis (summary)

7.2 Writing process (difficulties while writing the paper)

Students reported a wide variety of issues related to:

- Different sections of the paper: abstract, **introduction**, the aim of the study, results, **discussion**, conclusions, and sometimes in general with the structure of the paper.
- The language: punctuation, grammar, specialized and technical vocabulary, translation of specific concepts that are different in the target language, use of synonyms, agreement, syntax, word order, translation of a quote from Spanish into English, use of connectors.
- The academic genre. Students highlighted difficulties with the rhetoric and on how to write using the English conventions and not only to “translate” words or sentences from Spanish to English. They also reported problems with the academic and formal style of writing in English.

7.3 Writing process (strategies)

Students:

- Relied on other people to check their work: thesis supervisor, friends and native speakers.
- Used other papers to follow the same structure of theirs.
- Used translators, online dictionaries and the same sources of information to express their ideas.
- Usually wrote a thesis in Spanish and then adapted and translated it into English for the paper.

7.4 Feelings while writing in English

- Students quite often described negative feelings of frustration, anger, regret for not being an English native speaker, lack of confidence and frustration when feeling stuck and unable to write, stress because of the need to publish to get their degree, overwhelmed with too many corrections and changes to make, tired because of the pressure to submit a draft on time for the AW course, stressed for not knowing exactly how to write the paper.
- Students also described to a less extent positive feelings of: comfort for being coached by their supervisor, motivation, confidence, satisfaction with the challenge of writing in English.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- Students at the postgraduate level face important language difficulties and academic writing constraints to publish in English.
- Specific university requirements at the postgraduate level, such as the publication of a paper, should follow a careful language policy and planning of academic writing courses in both languages, Spanish and English.
- Academic Writing Courses should be offered to all university students.

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