

Problems and Solutions in Response to Postgraduates' English Academic Writing

--A Case of SWPU

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Abstract: As we all know that many graduate students need to finish academic writing in English. Research on English academic writing has attracted increasing scholarly attention. However, there are few breakthroughs in the research on postgraduates' English academic writing in China, and few studies have focused on the writing difficulties and solutions of postgraduates of English majors. In this study, we mainly used a questionnaire and interview to explore 19 postgraduates of English major about their perceptions of factors affecting their writing, challenges encountered in the writing process, and coping strategies. Results indicate that: 1) all the postgraduates were clear about the steps and contents of an academic thesis, but more than half of them would write their thesis in Chinese first and then translate it into English; 2) many factors were important for English academic writing, and the most important of which were logic, good ideas, etc. The important factors affecting their writing were inappropriate expressions, the shortage of writing training, vocabulary and sentence form, etc.; 3) Postgraduates encountered many difficulties and challenges in the process of English academic writing, and the literature review and the selection of the topic were considered to be the most difficult parts. To cope with these difficulties, they adopted many solutions, such as reading more literature and imitating published papers.

Keywords: English Academic Writing; Difficulties; Solutions.

1. Introduction

With the internationalization of academic communication, English has become the standard communication language in academics (Hyland, 2014; Tang, 2012). Many journal papers and other research results in various disciplines in the international academic field are published in English, so scholars in various disciplines in the academic field around the world strive to write academic papers in English. In China, master's and doctoral students are the main force of thesis publication, but the quality of their English academic writing is generally unsatisfactory, so the improvement of postgraduates' English academic writing ability has become an important part of postgraduate cultivation in universities. However, domestic research on postgraduate academic English thesis writing is relatively lagging abroad, and most of the studies have focused on non-English major groups, ignoring postgraduates of English majors. Therefore, this study investigates the current situation of postgraduates' English academic writing, in order to understand the difficulties encountered by English major postgraduates and the solutions they adopted.

2. Literature Review

Postgraduates writing a thesis or dissertation (the terms are used interchangeably in this text) in English as a second language has drawn considerable research interest in recent decades. Although many postgraduates have studied English for many years, they still encounter various difficulties and challenges when finishing English academic writing. In fact, full-fledged English L2 researchers have also reported experiencing difficulty with language (Flowerdew, 1999; Okamura, 2006), indicating that the language problem is a pervasive concern for many English L2 research writers.

Moreover, Huang (2010) found that non-native English-speaking Ph.D. students were aware of their limited English proficiency and were at a disadvantage when it came to English academic writing. They lacked the motivation to change the situation.

Turning to the genre level, studies have also examined student perceptions of writing different parts of dissertations. For example, respondents in Liu Meihua&Liu Shisheng (2014) reported that the Literature Review, the Methodology, and the Findings/Analysis sections were the most difficult parts to write, while the Discussion produced diverse reactions among students. It was further found that postgraduates don't know which part should be written in detail or briefly. Similarly, Yelay Birhan (2017) indicated that the sources of the problems are: the students' poor background knowledge about academic writing, their poor attainment of university writing courses, and the absence of academic writing sources. Furthermore, Mansour (2021) also indicated that Saudi international graduate students face many rhetorical writing difficulties, such as in thinking critically, expressing ideas, delivering solid arguments to support research theses, and technical writing difficulties related to grammar and APA citations. Li & Flowerdew (2007) found that the academic English papers written by 9 Chinese science and engineering doctoral students had many problems in grammar, the accuracy of expression, wording and other aspects. As a result, they considered the quality of the language of the subject papers to be well below the minimum level acceptable for publication, requiring extensive proofreading, inspection and revision. Their research spans a long period, with a single and small sample sizes. Given a large number of Chinese EFL scholars and their diverse backgrounds, many relevant research are urgently needed.

The above studies have revealed that English L2 postgraduates faced a range of difficulties during the research

and writing process. Unfortunately, research on postgraduates' English academic writing in China has lagged relatively behind and is not well developed. And few studies have focused on writing difficulties and their solutions for postgraduates of English majors. With this purpose in mind, a questionnaire survey and some interviews were conducted for this study, aiming to investigate the process of 19 postgraduates' English academic writing, their perceptions of the factors affecting their writing and the challenges and solutions they encountered in the writing process. Here are the following specific research questions:

1) What is the writing process of postgraduates of an English major?

2) How do they perceive the various factors that affect their English academic writing?

3) What challenges did they encounter, and what solutions did they adopt in the process of English academic writing?

3. Methodology

3.1. The Participants

The survey was conducted with second-year graduate students in the College of Foreign Languages of SWPU at the end of the first semester, when they had completed their dissertation writing course and had some knowledge about English academic writing, thus the validity of the questionnaire can be guaranteed.

3.2. Research Tool

Based on the literature review, 17 questions were designed in the questionnaire, including the frequency of English academic writing, the importance of various factors in English academic writing, and the factors that promote or hinder one's English academic writing, as well as students' views on it. A total of 19 questionnaires were collected, of which 19 were valid. At the same time, they received 30 ~ 45 minutes of semi-structured interviews, which covered their personal experience in academic English paper writing, their opinions on academic English paper writing, various factors affecting their own academic English paper writing, their understanding of the process of academic English paper writing, the challenges and countermeasures in writing and the help they hope to get.

3.3. Data Collection

All subjects volunteered to participate in this study. All data were completed within two weeks in the middle and late of the semester, and the interviews were recorded. The author calculated the percentage of the questionnaire data, translated the interview recordings into words, and then analyzed them in detail according to the content-topic method (Charmaz 2006), categorizing the recurring themes or ideas one by one. To protect the privacy of the students, a pseudonym has been used when reporting and discussing the results.

4. Results&Discussion

As outlined earlier, the aim of the current study is to investigate the difficulties and their solutions in the process of English academic writing of postgraduates whose major is English. In this section, I will first report on their writing process, including their writing motivation. Then, the factors that affect their writing will be examined. At last, the research focuses on the difficulties and their solutions.

4.1. The Writing Process of Academic Writing in English

All study participants, like in Cargill&O'Connor (2006) and Flowerdew&Li (2007), were clear in all sections of formal English academic writing: abstract, introduction, literature review, research design, results and discussion, conclusion, acknowledgments, references, etc., and what each section contained and what problems needed to be addressed. Because "journals generally have clear instructions and requirements on paper structure" (Zhang, postgraduate). In line with the journal requirements, they believe that abstracts generally use simple and clear language to describe the purpose, methods, results and significance of the research; The introduction briefly describes the research background and development status of the subject, highlighting my own research; Literature review summarizes and summarizes academic schools and relevant empirical studies in your research field, and describes the current research trends in this field. "The purpose of the literature review is to prove that you have a certain depth of understanding of your research field; secondly, find out the shortcomings of the research and prove the necessity and significance of your research" (Yang, postgraduate); "The research design describes in detail its research methods, procedures and processes, etc., so that readers can not only feel the research is reasonable, but also repeat the research if necessary" (Yang, postgraduate); After obtaining the data, it is necessary to analyze the data objectively and correctly, and draw and display the results; The discussion part is the in-depth exploration of the research results, such as the quality and reasons of the results, the correlation between the results of this study and the existing research results, etc. The conclusion is to summarize this study logically, summarize the innovation points and deficiencies, and point out its research value and failure to possible research ideas and directions.

However, postgraduates do not take enough initiative to write an academic thesis in English. "To meet the graduation requirements" reaches 48%, accounting for the highest percentage. While 33.3% of postgraduates hold that they did it to complete assignments, only about 15% of postgraduates are proactive in writing the academic thesis in English and want to publish it in international journals. The percentage of "wanting to learn new knowledge" only accounts for 3%. Postgraduates do not understand the significance of English academic writing. Most importantly, 57.8% of postgraduates write their thesis in Chinese first and then translate it into English, and the direct consequence of this kind of translation is that the sentence patterns used are not English at all but almost exactly in Chinese Word order to express. There is another serious problem in language expression, which is that there is often strong subjective expression in students' papers, with "I" or "We" as the subject, thus the writing process often produces an unsatisfactory thesis.

4.2. The Perceptions of Factors Affecting English Academic Writing

4.2.1. The Important Factors in English Academic Writing

In this study, all participants rated the importance of factors affecting English academic writing. The results showed that good ideas, logic, relevance to the content of the topic, and literature research were considered the most important factors, and language knowledge, such as grammar is also of

significance. It seems that postgraduates agree that good research is the basis of an excellent academic thesis rather than language, though language knowledge plays an important role in English academic writing. This is basically consistent with the requirements of high-quality journals. This may also be due to the fact that the participants in this study are generally good at English and some have experience in English academic writing, so they focus more on the research itself rather than the language.

4.2.2. The Factors that Affect English Academic Writing

According to the interview, postgraduates believe that their mother tongue and thinking habits are the most important factors affecting their English academic writing. There are indeed great differences between English and Chinese, such as subject-predicate agreement, singular and plural agreement, the flexibility of parts of speech, word order, etc. (Cai Jigang 2001; He Shanfen 2002), and these differences lead to diversity in expression, making it difficult for them to accurately and fluently express their ideas in English. At the same time, as Zhou Lirui (2008) argues, Chinese people tend to think holistically and comprehensively, emphasizing ambiguity, while Westerners tend to think individually, emphasizing specificity and clarity. This difference in thinking pattern leads to the different structure of the discourses between the East and the West: Easterners use hints rather than directly to express their attitudes and opinions, and use vague clichés rather than concrete examples; Westerners, on the other hand, make their opinions clear and use various concrete examples to prove their opinions. These differences make Chinese scholars face a series of difficulties when writing an academic thesis in English, such as dealing with the beginning and the end part, how to express their opinions accurately and clearly, the lack of arguments, and the use of irrelevant materials (Flowerdew 2000; Kaplan & Baldauf 2005).

According to the interview results, other factors affecting the writing of academic English papers are: 1) lack of writing training; 2) Vocabulary and sentence patterns; 3) Native English expressions; 4) Lack of language environment; 5) Interest in scientific research; 6) Research content. As we all know, writing has always been a difficult part of language learning, and academic writing is even more difficult, requiring a lot of training and guidance, especially when writing academic papers in a foreign language. Although the subjects in this study all have different degrees of academic English writing experience, it is far from enough, coupled with the limitations of English as a foreign language (such as

the inability to freely use English words and sentence patterns) and the lack of English learning and writing environment (such as the daily demand for English is not great in China). As a result, their academic papers in English are "hard " to satisfy themselves.

According to the interview results, other factors affecting the writing of academic English papers are: 1) lack of writing training (6, 4.3 Challenges and their solutions.

Like the results of previous studies (Duszak & Lewkowicz 2009; Li & Flowerdew 2007;), the results show that the participants encountered many difficulties and challenges in writing an English thesis, such as 1) 22% of the graduate students complained about their expressions are not authentic and accurate enough; 2) 13.3% of the graduate students lacked rich vocabularies and sentence structures, 3) "the shortage of English writing training " accounted for 35.5%. 4) In addition, 28.8% of graduate students thought it took longer to write a thesis in English compared to writing in Chinese. These may be the reasons for their (52.6%) lack of confidence in English academic writing.

In response to these difficulties, postgraduates took the following measures: 1) looking up the dictionary and accumulating language knowledge; 2) imitating previously published articles; 3) repeatedly revising by themselves; 4) seeking help from teachers and classmates; 5) practicing more. Only one postgraduate has not yet found suitable methods.

Meanwhile, each part of English academic writing was also investigated (as shown in Figure 1). 73.6%, 26.3%, 78.9%, 26.3%, 36.8%, 36.8%, 78.9%, 21%, 84.1%, and 31.5% of the participants found the selection of the topic, introduction, literature review, discussion, selection of appropriate writing style, conclusion, research design, results, literature index, and references sections of English academic writing difficult, respectively. Thus, overall, all the participants found it difficult to write an academic thesis in English.

19 students hoped to take a specialized academic English essay writing course as an elective course. At the same time, they hoped that the teachers could: 1) clarify how to write each part and conduct specific training; 2) Provide some common sentence patterns; 3) How to train better English expression; 4) Teach with a research teacher in the major; 5) Invite some people with publishing experience to interact with students; 6) Ask students to revise repeatedly; 7) Encourage students to communicate and interact. At the same time, the subjects, just like Liu Shisheng and Liu Meihua (2013), positively evaluated the academic English writing tutoring platform being implemented by the university, believing that the platform provided them with great help.

Table 1. Evaluation of difficulties of English academic writing

items	strongly disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	strongly agree
topic selection	0 (0%)	2 (10.53%)	3 (15.79%)	12 (63.16%)	2 (10.53%)
introduction	0 (0%)	11 (57.89%)	3 (15.79%)	5 (26.32%)	0 (0%)
literature review	0 (0%)	1 (5.26%)	3 (15.79%)	8 (42.11%)	7 (36.84%)
discussion	0 (0%)	11 (57.89%)	3 (15.79%)	5 (26.32%)	0 (0%)
writing style	0 (0%)	6 (31.58%)	6 (31.58%)	7 (36.84%)	0 (0%)
conclusion	0 (0%)	7 (36.84%)	5 (26.32%)	7 (36.84%)	0 (0%)
research design	0 (0%)	1 (5.26%)	3 (15.79%)	13 (68.42%)	2 (10.53%)
results	0 (0%)	10 (52.63%)	5 (26.32%)	4 (21.05%)	0 (0%)
literature index	0 (0%)	2 (10.53%)	1 (5.26%)	12 (63.16%)	4 (21.05%)
reference	0 (0%)	7 (36.84%)	6 (31.58%)	6 (31.58%)	0 (0%)

It can be seen that in order to improve their confidence and ability in academic English writing, they need a lot of writing practice and guidance and help from relevant teachers. This shows that it is necessary to set up academic English paper

writing courses in colleges and universities. Moreover, teachers who set up such courses need to be familiar with the process and norms of academic English writing, and it is better to have experience in writing and publishing academic English papers, so as to help students write academic English

papers better and more effectively. According to the author's research, few colleges and universities offer academic English paper writing courses in China. In view of the current demand of colleges and students for publishing English academic papers, college leaders and English department teachers urgently need to pay attention to this. However, how to meet the needs of students depends on the specific situation and needs further investigation and research.

5. Conclusion

This study used questionnaires to explore the process of 19 postgraduates' English academic writing, their perceptions of the factors affecting their academic English academic writing, and the challenges English academic writing and solutions they adopted in the writing process. The results showed that all participants were clear about the text structure of a formal academic thesis and what each part should contain, but they were not active in English academic writing, and more than half of the students wrote in Chinese first and then translated it into English. At the same time, they believe that many factors are important for English academic writing, the most essential of which are logic, good research ideas, overall structure, relevance to the content of the topic, and handling of the task; there are also many factors that affect their writing: native language, thinking habits, the shortage of writing training, vocabulary and sentence structure, authentic expressions, etc. For various reasons, the participants encountered various difficulties in writing an academic thesis in English: they found it difficult to write the introduction, literature review, discussion, conclusion, research design, and result sections of their papers at the text level; and in the specific writing process, inaccurate expression, lack of writing training, and logic were difficult for them.

To cope with these difficulties, they adopted different solutions, such as reading more literature, imitating excellent published theses, and seeking help from teachers. To this end, we suggest that the college invites seniors to share their writing experiences. Moreover, establishing a writing centre is conducive to students' writing, commonly seen at the university in America. And it can improve students' confidence and competence in English academic writing, and meet their needs for academic communication in English.

In addition, tutors also need to update their teaching concepts and teaching methods through their own theoretical learning, improve their professional knowledge and scientific research ability, and strengthen the teaching links. And tutors should be involved in guiding graduate students in academic English writing, and should be involved in the whole process of thesis writing. It includes strengthening the guidance in the preparation stage of thesis writing, strengthening the guidance and monitoring of the writing process, and helping students to understand the writing norms of academic English style.

For postgraduates, the first thing they should do is improve their English. Secondly, supplement academic English-related knowledge. As a kind of specialized English, academic English has a strong tendency to explain and demonstrate in language expression, a clear professional direction in content selection, and a professional standard format. Relevant research shows that academic writing needs relevant content knowledge and application skills, such as knowledge from different sources, knowledge reconstruction,

knowledge reorganization, knowledge evaluation and development, etc. Therefore, graduate students need to master specific knowledge of academic English and improve their understanding of this genre. Finally, students should correct their attitude, improve their initiative and build self-confidence. Some graduate students have weak motivation in academic English writing, avoid academic English writing, muddle through and do something perfunctory. In this regard, we must actively adjust our mentality and strengthen our self-management ability.

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