International postgraduate students' responses to their academic writing challenges in Anglophone universities

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Overview

1. Introduction: 2017 BALEAP presentation
2. Socialisation challenges for graduate L2 writers
3. Coping strategies & support
4. Methodology
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7. Using narrative frames

Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education + dominance of English as an academic lingua franca

Auckland: 26% of all postgraduate students

Reading: 37% of all postgraduate students

Aim of the study: to explore commonalities in the *academic discourse socialisation* experiences and coping strategies of incoming international postgraduate students (IGS) in two English- medium universities

Psychological & sociocultural challenges

Psychological: anxiety, stress, depression, identity shift…

Sociocultural: relationships with supervisors, peers, hosts; new university procedures and interactions; adaptation to a culture of unstated rules, self-reliance & individual effort

International students: triple transition: (1) graduate study (2) study in English (3) study in an Anglo-western culture

Brown & Holloway, 2008; Chang & Kanno, 2010; Sato & Hodge, 2009

Factors contributing to success:
- English proficiency
- Academic knowledge
- Intercultural competence
- Realistic expectations
- Local support

Academic socialisation

A complex, interactive process involving potentially problematic negotiations between novices, full community members, and peers from the home and host communities

Duff, 2010; Morita, 2004

Challenges on entry:

- noticing differences between home and host contexts e.g. writer responsible vs reader responsible writing

- gaining knowledge of genre features and purposes

- mastering persuasive, evaluative writing (not descriptive)

- developing an appropriate authorial identity

- maintaining a dialogue with readers and anticipating their needs

- creating coherent texts through word choice, markers, metadiscourse

Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997; Duff,2010; Huang, 2010; Morita, 2004; Nam & Beckett, 2011

Coping strategies

Previous studies report that successful students….

- actively engage with challenges → self-directed learners

- make use of intertextual resources for writing

- find out about disciplinary practices and expectations

- establish supportive relationships with supervisor and peers

- see themselves as apprentices but also legitimate members of in the new community *Chang & Kanno, 2010; Kuwhara, 2008*

Brown & Holloway, 2008; Nam & Beckett, 2011; Sato & Hodge, 2009

Aim of the study:

To add to our knowledge of (1) socialisation of IGS into written academic discourse (2) differences & commonalities in the narratives of IGS students from diverse backgrounds

Research questions

1. What **knowledge and experience** do current IGS bring with them to study in an English medium university?

2. What academic discourse socialisation **challenges** do they encounter?

3. What **coping strategies** do they draw on and develop?

4. What sources of **advice and support** do they find helpful?

Exploration: narrative frames (NF)

Students provide reflections, views and stories on aspects of their academic literacy development:

a. About me & my past

b. Prior knowledge & getting used to a new academic community

c. Writing using sources & developing my identity as an author

d. Managing information & interacting with the reader

e. Writing in a questioning, evaluative way

f. Learning from written feedback

g. Sources of guidance & support

(7-8 sentence starters per frame – examples on following slide)

Sample narrative frames

C. Writing using sources and developing my identity as an author

I understand that writing using sources is an essential academic writing skill because
…………………… For example, when I wrote a recent assignment, I tried to follow the rules
about using sources by ……………… My understanding of the term "authorial identity" is that
I also need to…………………... When I wrote a recent assignment, I tried to establish my
identity as author of the text through ………………I think I'm making progress in being able
to refer to external sources and at the same time establish my own identity in my writing.
However, I find some aspects of it challenging, such as ……………….. What would help to me
develop my ability in this area is ………………

D. Managing information and interacting with the reader

I understand that the writer needs to manage the flow of information, and help readers to
"navigate" their way through the text. This is really important because ……………………….
When I wrote a recent assignment, I did these things to try to help the reader of my text:
………………………I think I'm making progress in being able to manage information and
interact with the reader. However, I find ……………………. challenging. What would help to me
develop my ability to manage information and interact with the reader is ………………………….

Why narrative frames?

Advantages of NF

- Themes are nominated by researcher
- Amount and type of information controlled by participant
- Participants' views are specific and directly represented
- Less threatening than an interview or questionnaire
- Allow time for reflection
- Scaffold the reflective writing that L2 learners can find difficult
- Data are meaningful and able to be compared across participants - facilitates DA

Possible disadvantages of NF

- Small numbers of participants
- Choice of frames decides what is reflected on
- Novices may have fewer insights
- Frames can be misinterpreted
- Truth value – participants may be unwilling or unable to disclose
- Stories can become "depersonalised" in DA phase
- NF best if integrated with other sources e.g. interviews
  (Barkhuizen, 2014)

Participants and context

Total: 31;   UoA: 17; UoR: 14

Gender: Female: 22; Male: 9

Countries: 20

- China: 6 students
- Brazil, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Vietnam: 2 students each
- Bangladesh, Cambodia, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sudan, Turkey: 1 student each

Level of study: PG Diploma:1; Masters:18; PhD:12

Disciplines: Applied Linguistics/TESOL: 22; Sciences: 6; Education: 3

Data collection and analysis

- Students contacted; volunteers requested to complete NFs in their own time online

- Follow-up interviews conducted with each who returned completed NFs

- NF answers collated by frame item

- Themes identified

Results

1. Prior knowledge and experience

Prior experience	Current challenges	Strategies
• Little/no explicit teaching of genre structures • Tests +oral presentations; few assignments • No explicit guidelines or criteria • Little feedback • Relatively short, simple texts cf. IELTS • Focus on accuracy and sentence grammar	• Source text use • "Writer responsible" considerations • Evaluative writing (stance) • Front-loading of key information • Coherence, cohesion, conciseness, flow…	• Online tools (dictionary, concordances, grammar editing, google translate) • Writing courses • Noting and recycling vocabulary from texts *(not always successful)* • Making multiple drafts *(with time gaps)*

2. Authorial identity & writing using sources

Prior experience	Current challenges	Strategies

• Use of quotations[++] to show how the originator expressed the idea
 	
• Impersonal writing style
	• Understanding key points in texts in order to interpret and evaluate
	
	• Distinguishing own ideas/ propositions from those found in source texts & use of personal "I"
	
	• Using metadiscourse to manage information
	
	• "Limitations on my content knowledge, understanding of implicit rules + lack of confidence ☹"
		• Making sure text content is fully understood before interpreting and citing
		
		• Noting own ideas before and while reading →
		
		• Developing a textual voice:
		
		  ○ evaluations of texts as "a platform to launch own ideas" and arguments
		  ○ finding "gaps" in current knowledge & contribution of own study

3. Writer-reader relationships

Prior experience	Current challenges	Strategies
• Writing for a knowledgeable reader - • Writing can be elaborate and circular • Writer can use long, complex sentences • 'When I write Japanese essays I intentionally try to be ambiguous - it's expected, but when I write English academic essays I have to hold readers' hands throughout"	• Achieving a coherent, logical organisation • Readable sentences in complexity & length • Explicit signposting for the reader (metadiscourse) • Following "pre-shaped" text structures e.g. CARS model for RR Introduction • "Putting myself in the reader's place"	• Efforts to shift from "beautiful writing" to writing for the reader • Attention to transitions, coherence, cohesion • Provide headings; signposts; examples… to "guide the reader's interpretation of the text"

4. Critical/evaluative writing

Prior experience	Current challenges	Strategies
Varies – but for most students: • critical/evaluative writing – not required • Little writing for assessment (beyond exams) • Descriptive writing • Focus on linguistic accuracy	• Critically evaluation of authoritative sources • Evaluating in an academic/persuasive way • Critical synthesis of previous research	• Reading published work • Reading with a purpose (to analyse writer's viewpoint & evidence) • Practice writing with different stances • Feedback from supervisors/ teachers and peers

5. Learning from feedback (FB)

Prior experience	Unhelpful FB	Helpful FB
• Focus on linguistic errors (21 mentioned this) – mostly grammar • FB on content (5) • No FB, beyond grade (5)	• Too general/vague, eg: '*Improve critical evaluation*' • Not linked to examples in the writer's text • No suggestions for improvement • Unclear comments	• On content • On language • On use of sources • On essay structure • Identifying specific issues and how to improve them • On strengths as well as weaknesses • Includes oral FB too • '*Prompt, precise and criterion-based*'

6. Guidance and support

People	Courses	Other resources
• Language advisors in support centres • Writing course tutors • Content lecturers • Supervisors • Peers • Proof-readers	• The Library – PG writing workshops • Graduate writing courses as part of programme of study • In-sessional writing courses	• Books/articles in own field • Websites on academic writing (Manchester Phrase Bank, Purdue online Writing Lab) • Published academic writing books • Examples of previous successful student writing

Implications for (hopefully!) transforming academic literacy support

Student needs

Our international graduate students told us they need to:

- "unlearn" home writing cultures

- adjust to writer-responsible, reader-oriented approach

- learn to write in a clear, concise, direct, non-repetitive style

- accurately synthesis source text content

- display stance on sources

- develop an authoritative, questioning voice in their texts.

Generic EAP writing can help to:

- develop academic language – through direct teaching (vocabulary, grammar, linkers)

- show organisation of different genres (sections/sub-sections; 'signposting' text)

- develop summarising skills

- develop 'noticing' skills in reading (of texts, FB)

- develop students' confidence to ask for information about tasks (rubrics, criteria)

- talk about proof readers: who, and what they can do

Embedded writing support can help to:

- discuss writing task when presenting assessed writing tasks: rubrics; marking criteria

- work through examples of successful/unsuccessful writing (published/students') as apprentice writers

- show how to use reading in successful writing

- show how to draw on own experience

- develop an authorial presence

- encourage informed peer support

1. Need for supervisors and teachers to be aware ….

- of students' C1 and L1 learning history and its influence on the challenges they face
- of the validity of alternative ways of structuring texts (beyond the "deficit" model)
- that PG students are (paradoxically) learning to participate in an academic community by becoming independent & knowledgeable about implicit practices

2. The value of explicit writing instruction (EGAP, ESAP or within academic modules) for making implicit aspects of academic literacies transparent

3. The particular value of supervisors/lecturers and capable peers (their knowledge of content + language)

Using narrative frames
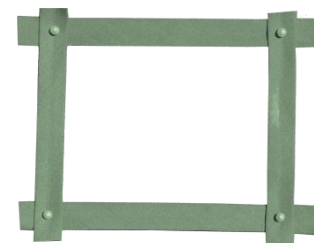
Participants (interview comments)

- "Activated my thinking about these topics"
- "Helped me prepare for interviews"
- "Gave me time to think, reflect and remember" not possible in interviews
- "Good to be able to do them over several weeks – reflect, add…
- Guided structure helpful: "kept me on track - narrowed the topics"
- Straightforward to complete – "like a cloze"

The researchers

☺ Themed responses facilitated data analysis

☺ Provided insights into participants' perspectives and lived experiences

☹ Some participants wrote relatively little – differences across the group in self-awareness and in ability to articulate

☹ Interviews clarified/explored frame content (inexperienced writers)
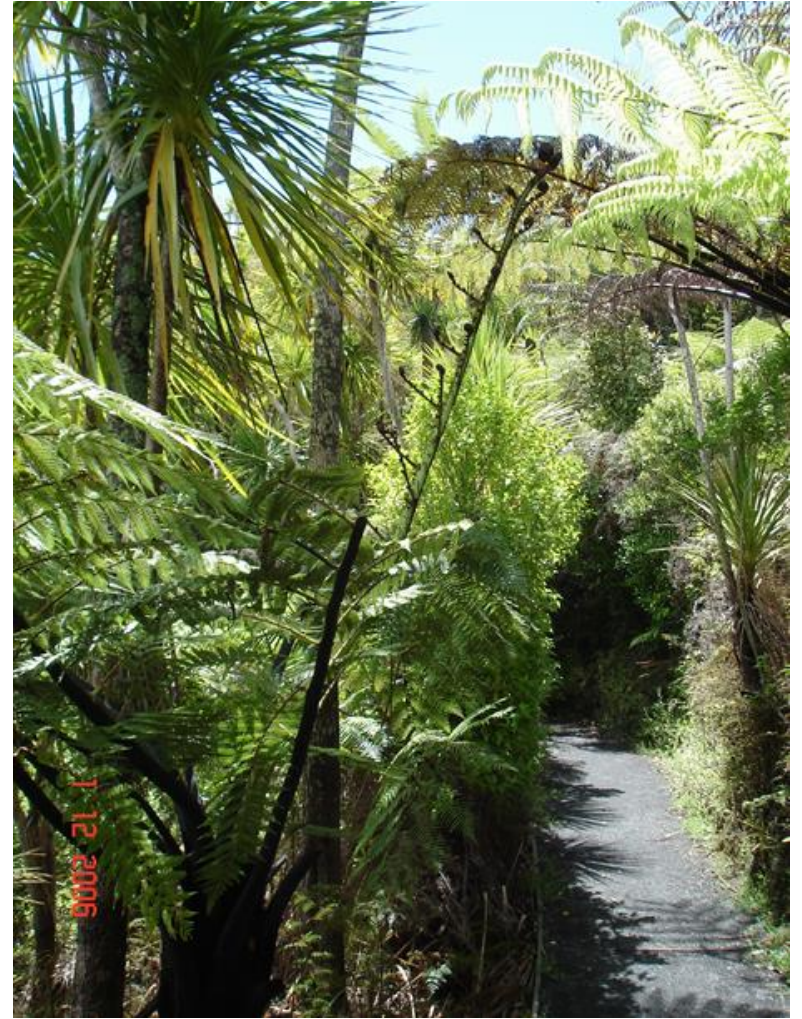
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Thanks for coming to our presentation!

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