



Academic writing support for EAL PhD candidates: What works and the way forward

Key Words

academic writing, thesis writing, writing support, evaluation, EAL doctoral students

Abstract

Doctoral writing entails significant challenges for many PhD candidates and students are expected to be familiar with discipline-specific writing conventions in order to participate in scholarly conversations and become a member of the discourse community (Flowerdew, 2000; Maher, Feldon, Timmerman, & Chao, 2014). While many PhD students have foundational content knowledge and technical skills to undertake research projects, some entered their doctoral program unprepared to engage in disciplinary writing (Maher et al., 2014). To assist students in developing effective thesis writing skills, institutional language support services are available in various forms such as writing courses, generic workshops, writing groups, writing retreats, and one-on-one consultations. For English as an additional language (EAL) doctoral students, thesis writing can be an even greater challenge as they have to write their thesis in a second language and therefore may encounter additional linguistic and rhetorical challenges in academic writing. It has been reported that generic discursive skills such as argumentation and coherence-building, which are essential in academic writing, are considered particularly challenging to these students (e.g., Benfield & Howard, 2000; Curry & Lillis, 2004). Research has also shown that they need more time and efforts when writing research findings in English (Flowerdew, 1999; Kwan, 2013). As such, they may be at a disadvantage when compared with their native counterparts. This presentation reports the results of a study which aims to evaluate the effectiveness of various types of writing support services provided for doctoral students from the perspectives of EAL students. It addresses a significant gap in previous studies, which tend to investigate only one type of writing support individually rather than adopting a holistic approach towards evaluation. In this study, data were collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with students enrolled in 4 different faculties at an Australian university. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes and participants were asked to provide feedback on their learning experiences, and to comment on the effectiveness and perceived impacts of academic writing support services on their thesis writing. Data were analysed through content analysis of the interview transcripts to identify common themes emerged in the data. In this presentation, student feedback on various support services such as generic writing workshops, writing groups, and one-on-one consultations are discussed. It covers a discussion of student preferences for academic writing support, a critical analysis of student learning needs, as well as helpful and unhelpful feedback on writing drafts provided by learning advisers and peers. The findings will expand understanding of the strengths and shortcomings of various writing support practices. This study does not only provide a detailed evaluation of writing support services but also enables academic language and learning (ALL) professionals to gain insights into effective designs to facilitate improvement in service delivery. This presentation concludes with practical recommendations for learning advisers and discusses theoretical implications for researchers.

References

Benfield, J. R. and Howard, K. M. (2000). The language of science. *European Journal of Cardiothoracic Surgery*, 18, 642-648.

Curry, M. J. and Lillis, T. (2004). Multilingual scholars and the imperative to publish in English: Negotiating interests, demands, and rewards. *TESOL Quarterly*, 3 (4), 663-688.

Flowerdew, J. (1999). Problems in writing for scholarly publication in English: The case of Hong Kong. *Journal of Second language Writing*, 8 (3), 243-264.

Flowerdew, J. (2000). Discourse Community, Legitimate Peripheral Participation, and the Nonnative-English-Speaking Scholar. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(1), 127–150.

Kwan, B. S. C. (2013). Facilitating novice researchers in project publishing during the doctoral years and beyond: A Hong Kong-based study. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (2), 207-225. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2011.576755

Maher, M., Feldon, D. F., Timmerman, B. E., and Chao, J. (2014). Faculty perceptions of common challenges encountered by novice doctoral writers, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33 (4), pp. 669-711.