

NOTES ON INFORMAL STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC WRITING TRAINING

Rodica Ioana Lung, Tudor Dan Mihoc

Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca, Romania
Phone: +40723190299, E-Mail: rodica.lung@econ.ubbcluj.ro

Abstract. *In a time when top ranked research institutions provide their students with academic writing support in various forms (training, courses, writing centers, etc.), a Romanian university is starting to cope with this particular need and to design, within a research project, an appropriate and realistic program for academic writing skills development. This paper analyses the existing academic writing mentoring approaches in the literature and proposes a framework for experienced researchers to train doctoral and postdoctoral students in an informal, yet organized manner.*

Key words: *academic writing, informal strategies, scientific articles*

1. INTRODUCTION

English for research publication purposes, considered a branch of English for Academic purposes, recently become a field of great interest worldwide due to scholars increasing requirement to publish. Professional researchers, in order to be promoted, are forced to survive in a 'publish or perish' world by supplying a constant stream of papers. More than this, in several academic tuition institutes students graduations with honors are conditioned by the publishing of original research results. Even if the standards required for these papers are significantly lower than the ones of the Ph.D. students and researchers, they do have to undergo a peer review process since this is currently the universally accepted procedure used to ensure the academic quality of any contribution.

In Romanian academic institutions hiring, tenure and promotions are generally based on a system of points quantifying the research output. The system measures the quality and the quantity of the publications and their impact based on citations found in major indexing systems. The most appreciated of them is the Thomson Reuters Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) Web of Science. As stated on their website, this indexing system focuses only on journals that publish full-text English papers or at very last, bibliographic information on English language. Other systems for indexing also use English as the main language to compute the impact of the publications. These facts contribute in increasing the importance of English as the language for the global knowledge stream. As a consequence English has become indisputably - for Romanian scholars - the lingua franca for publishing and for sharing results, even among themselves. Therefore, to be successful in Romanian academia one must produce papers with a high impact factor measured in prestigious indexes, papers that are written mostly in English.

While this situation ensures a series of major benefits to the Romanian researchers: rapid dissemination of their work, access to knowledge, potential to create and establish

cross-cultural understanding with other researchers across the globe, it also brings some negative aspects: the use of academic English devaluates local language and/or perpetuates inequalities between native and non native speakers.

English hegemony in the scientific domain also excludes science conducted outside the main stream. Many scholars consider that precious knowledge remains hidden that way, knowledge that can have significant potential in the development of science and industry. For example, the only way to understand some exotic diseases is to valorise the studies of local researchers from the third world countries, researchers that do not have the possibility (material and logistic) to widely disseminate their work.

Other negative aspects are related to the potential advantages of native English speakers (NS) versus non-native speakers (NNS). Several studies conducted in Spain as well in the Scandinavian countries from the '90s underline this aspect pointing out the difficulties encountered by scientists undergoing the process of publishing.

To overcome this inconveniency, special attention needs to be focused on an individual scholar by developing strategies for NNS researchers to address specific needs and problems and to help improve their position in the academic community.

Depending on cultural and educational traditions, universities worldwide are dealing with this issue in different manners, either by establishing academic writing centers and/or by offering courses and training programs. A search performed on the top 100¹ universities shows that all of them offer organized training for Academic Writing skills development in some form. In this context, at Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca, an interdisciplinary Academic Writing research project is trying to assess the optimal manner to approach academic writing skills development taking into account Romanian realities. While certain general aspects related to academic writing can be taught within a course, there are several particularities related to specific disciplines and also to Romanian language and cultural traditions that have to be also taken into account.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the existing approaches to mentoring/coaching doctoral or postdoctoral student on academic writing, and based on the findings and also considering the realities of the Romanian research landscape, to design an informal approach to AW training on disciplines.

2. MENTORING AND WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Mentoring in general, related to academic writing in particular, is known as a successful tool for academic development (Eby et al., 2008, Jacobi, M. 199, Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes 2006, Pololi et al. 2004). While there are no rigorous reports in the literature presenting scientific evidence for the effect of a particular mentoring program for academic writing, there is a plethora of articles and initiatives advocating directly or indirectly for this approach. One of the first solution that includes informal guidance and indirect mentoring is the organization of writing retreats. Moore (2003) presents evidences gathered during the writer's retreat with arguments supporting the potential benefits of such an intervention.

A generalization of this approach that does not require actual time away is the writing consultation: "the process of revealing and developing writing practices in a specific form

¹ Academic Ranking of Research Universities - www.shanghairanking.com

of regular, structured, collegial discussion” (Murray et al., 2008). This kind of approach focused on writing as behavior is aimed at helping researchers to improve their writing practices by offering support for prioritizing, conceptualizing, organizing, emphasizing motivation as a prerequisite for any academic writing endeavor. One of the main advantages of the writing consultation is that it can establish mutual peer support for writing; in support of this idea Grzybowski et al. (2003) show that peer discussions are a factor for increasing published output.

Another advantage of the writing consultation is that it creates a framework that allows dealing with personal issues connected to writing. Personal aspects connected to the writing process are acknowledged by Cameron et al. (2009). Emotions (such as self-doubt) arising during the writing process hinder the process and inhibit the personal development as a researcher by obstructing the writer’s identity buildup. The authors argue that a training program should address these three major aspects of writing: emotions, know-how and identity, personal aspects of the first and the last one suggesting that an academic writing mentoring program may be the best way to approach it, as it provides minimum trainee personal exposure.

The mentoring/coaching approach is supported also by Badley (2009) in a paper that presents reflective essays as tools for effective academic writing and even learning. In his papers he urges teachers to develop a mentoring/coaching style by “encouraging students to see academic writing as trying out, as essaying, as experimenting with, and as learning through the ideas and materials they reflect upon”.

As far as writing in the disciplines is concerned, the contents based academic instruction is presented as a viable solutions by Shih (1986), who proposes four different providing methods: topic-centered modules, content based academic writing courses oriented on intensive reading and writing, content-centered EAPs, and composition and multi-skill, offered by a faculty in writing-across-the-curriculum programs, tutors, and writing center staff.

However, Elton (2010) argues that most rules of academic writing are tacit, apart from being discipline dependent. This implies that in order to achieve an improvement in this respect, both language courses and interaction with experienced researchers are required: a deep understanding of the language usage offers students correct tools to express themselves, while experienced researchers teach them how and why to conform to the tacit rules of their fields; Elton argues that making these rules explicit may have “serious effects on good disciplinary writing”, and also suggests that the difficulties arising can be overcome by direct communication between student and tutor.

Two studies advocate also for the involvement of journals in this process in two different manners: Lillis (2013) presents a mentoring program implemented starting from the concerns of journal editors and Adamson (2012) presents a mentoring program for journal reviewers. While the solution proposed by Lillis (2013) may not be implementable as it requires involvement of journal editors, the preliminary findings of the study are relevant to our paper: “Generic courses cannot inform authors about the specific practices and values (including language practices) of journals and it is these specific practices that authors need to know about.”; “Authors who achieve success in publishing in English often do so because of their work with ‘brokers’ with whom they work (editors, translators, English-speaking academics, colleagues) who support the production of texts in different ways.”; and “Language issues are far more complex than often assumed,

involving attention to content as well as form, recognition of different cultural - linguistic traditions and authority and control over what counts as appropriate English”

The mentoring program for reviewers presented by Adamson (2012) is an indirect approach that relates to mentoring academic writing (AW). Mentoring reviewers is closely connected to their academic writing development as performing peer reviewing offers young researchers the possibility to strengthen their constructive critical thinking, allowing them to improve their own papers after apprehending how reviewers and readers in general actually perceive a paper.

In our approach, we move further to propose that experienced researchers belonging to research groups, in collaboration with an academic writing language trainer, develop the necessary skills to mentor young researchers with their writing tasks. Such an approach would represent only a step further to what is actually happening in most Romanian universities: a group leader/PhD coordinator tutors (or not) students and briefly explains them the tacit rules of their research field, leaving them to ‘figure it out on their own’.

3. AN INFORMAL FRAMEWORK

Our approach combines an informal one-to-one communication within a research group with the participation of experienced researchers and the collaboration of a language expert. The main tool employed is the direct communication with student during regular meetings with an experienced researcher that has academic writing training experience. During this program students will prepare a scientific paper to be submitted for presentation to a conference.

A general structure² designed for students in physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, computer science, economics, and related fields, would consist of six modules focused on:

- Online documentation through scientific databases research covering search strategies for a thorough documentation by using specific online databases of scientific journals. Task: create a personal database containing relevant articles covering a topic on the field of research of the participants.
- Identification and construction of motivation for writing a scientific document: identification of objectives/motivation for scientific articles based on examples from the covered field of research; establishing the research area and the originality of the research by using relevant sources; identification of different discourse genres (description, argumentation, hypothesis formulation, etc.) used for motivation; references and citations management according to the publication type (communication, research article, review article). Task: preparing the introductory section of an article participants are working on.
- Presentation of methods, results and discussion; interpretation of results and conclusions; presentation of the methodology (with examples from literature) – with the emphasis on ensuring the trade-off between a concise but comprehensive style of presenting relevant information; combining descriptive and argumentative

² The authors would like to acknowledge the help received from Iu Filip at the National Institute for Research and Development of Isotopic and Molecular Technologies Cluj Napoca in designing this framework and that of Camelia Moraru regarding the concept of informal approach.

styles in writing the results and discussions sections; managing tables and figures; summarizing results; emphasizing the novelty of the research and potential impact on future research. Task: drafting the experimental/results and discussion parts of an article.

- Reference and citation management: using references manager software (e.g. EndNote); ethics in publishing: correct source citation to establish the right context for the results; rules for writing the acknowledgments.
- Final touches: revision as the path to stylish writing; peer reviews performed by colleagues and direct feedback from both tutors.
- Presenting scientific work: preparing oral communications – principles, software programs; tips and tricks; adjusting to audience; preparing posters.

As this is an informal intervention, progress will be monitored through the entire program and feed-back will be given constantly. All feed back is provided by both the experienced researchers and language experts. At the end of the program a young researcher should be able to draft a paper and prepare a presentation of its results respecting the rules of academic writing in its field. The main drawback of this approach is that it requires the involvement of an experienced researcher willing not only to offer their time and resources to this task, but also to collaborate with language teachers in order to provide the best possible feed back as far as both content and vocabulary and grammar are concerned.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Informal knowledge transfer regarding academic writing in the disciplines takes place tacitly in most Romanian universities. The usual scenario involves a young researcher – postdoctoral, master or PhD student – that enters a research group and it is guided by more experienced members in all aspects of research including experts on scientific writing. The guidance received depends on the group leader, group members, and most of the times, on the student's promise and potential.

Our approach is aimed to enhance this empirical process by providing an organized framework comprising not only of writing but also of related aspects concerning research methodology and specific tacit and explicit rules of scientific articles preparation. An experienced researcher takes upon her/himself the task of training novices in the field and guides them through all the stages of writing a paper, in closed collaboration with a linguist in order to validate and enhance the quality of the text.

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