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Research Domain: Student Experience

Writing in L2 English at the Doctoral Level – How Is It Perceived by Students and Addressed in Supervision? (0238)

Purpose of presentation The purpose of this presentation is to provide insight into the experiences of doctoral students “at home” in establishing themselves as legitimate and convincing academic authors in L2 English. The aim is also to suggest pedagogical and institutional strategies for addressing these difficulties.

Background Increasing numbers of doctoral students in Denmark and other Nordic and European countries are completing their dissertations in English in response to the growing internationalization of higher education and research (Tang 2012). At many Danish higher education institutions, this development has not been accompanied by a corresponding increased focus on students’ writing skills in English. This is in part due to the generally accepted – and institutionally sanctioned – idea that Danish students have sufficiently advanced English language skills. This project grew out of an interest in better understanding and addressing the challenges facing Danish doctoral students as they transition from writing in Danish to writing in English.

Aim of project: The presentation is based on a research project designed to analyze how doctoral students experience and handle the processes and expectations associated with academic writing in English as a second language, and to what extent and how these processes and expectations are addressed in supervision.

Methods: The project consists of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was collected in spring 2012 through an online anonymous survey among 274 doctoral students enrolled at the graduate school of Arts, Aarhus University. The response rate was 54 percent (N=149). The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data was gathered in 2011-2012 as part of three separate doctoral courses on academic writing in English at the same graduate school. The data consists of 20 doctoral students’ written answers to reflection questions about their Danish and English writing processes, experiences and skills, as well as their attitudes towards writing in English. The written material was analyzed qualitatively. Data was coded inductively in Dedoose® and subsequently subjected to a content analysis looking for recurring themes and patterns of meaning.

Findings: Our survey shows that more than half of the respondents have chosen to write their doctoral dissertation in English, and that more than half of the respondents' supervisors had not read any of the students' English texts before they chose the language of their dissertation. Furthermore, although two-thirds of the respondents rated their writing skills in English as *good or very good*, about one third of the students writing in English had only very limited experience with academic writing in English prior to commencing their PhD studies. The data also indicates that the issues faced by students writing their doctoral dissertations in English generally play a minor role in the supervision process.

The open-ended survey questions and the qualitative research component reveal that many of the students consider writing in English to be considerably more demanding than writing in Danish. Significantly, the most frequent writing-related concerns reported related to lexico-grammatical challenges and time pressures. In addition, many of the students expressed overall feelings of insecurity and a lack of autonomy in relation to writing in English, with some highlighting their tendency to imitate other authors – emotions and practices which they did not express in relation to writing in Danish.

Discussion and implications: The students' tendency to articulate their challenges as related primarily to surface rather than deeper rhetorical and discourse-related issues suggests that the students are inclined to focus on academic writing as a professional skill unrelated to issues of authorial voice and identity construction. However, the negative experiences and emotions that they associate with academic writing in English would seem to indicate not only that these same students find their academic writing skills lacking in English, but also that they are facing deeper challenges related to learning new discourse practices, and consequently that academic writing in Danish and English is tightly bound up with their personal and academic identities. These findings are supported by theories of identity and language learning such as Norton (1997, 2000) and Kramsch (2009).

Based on our findings, we suggest that the doctoral students' writing skills and processes should not be regarded as an individual or personal problem but rather as an institutional concern. We therefore recommend increased support and encouragement of student writing in English at earlier stages, and especially an enhanced focus on rhetoric and discourse in writing development programs (Carter 2011), while acknowledging the importance of strong grammar skills in persuasive writing (Micciche 2004). In line with Hirvela (1997), we advocate applying an individualized, portfolio-based approach to the teaching of academic writing because it enables junior scholars to

develop discourse awareness in a foreign language and the self-regulatory strategies which serve to sharpen their ability to monitor and evaluate their writing.

In addition, we recommend formal training of supervisors. Our study highlights the importance of supervisors helping students to make well-informed, conscious decisions about the language of their dissertation. In line with Aitchison et al (2005) we suggest that supervisors develop a repertoire of strategies to help students construct their emerging identities as academic writers and to more explicitly communicate about thesis requirements and expectations as part of supervision programs (Bitchener & Baturkmenb (2006).

Finally, we recommend that the traditional dyadic apprenticeship model of supervision be supplemented with integration of students into the wider discourse communities of practice (Boud & Lee 2005) (Flowerdew 2000) (Paltridge & Woodrow 2012), e.g. by encouraging them to participate in peer feedback sessions (Stracke (2010) and writing groups (Parker 2009) as well as to actively use the specific feedback they receive from editorial boards on their manuscript submissions to international journals (Swales 2004, Misak et al 2005). The increasing amount of research interest in the challenges of L2 academic writers (Tang 2012) suggests that our study is not limited to a Danish context, but addresses global issues relevant for many European countries with 'small languages' and tacit assumptions about their "home" students' L2 English skills.

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