

CRITICALITY, DEPTH AND VOICE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing plays a crucial role in academic as well as professional life of learners. Developing academic writing takes long time and efforts. Though there are multiple factors that play the role of enablers or disablers for success in academic writing, awareness of basic characteristics of academic writing is a fundamental prerequisite. Similarly, the requirements of academic writing differ from culture to culture and institution to institution. Therefore, it is highly important for learners to understand the expectations of academic writing in their institutions. This article describes an ethnographic study that was conducted in the University of Sydney, Australia to understand a course coordinator's expectation regarding criticality, depth and voice in academic writing. To answer the research question raised in the study, data were collected from published and unpublished secondary sources, an interview coordinator of the of course Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and an assignment in SLA. The thematic analysis of data revealed that criticality, depth and voice are important characteristics of academic writing. Different ways to meet the expectation of criticality, depth and voice are discussed and some suggestions for further research are forwarded based on the discussion.

Key Words: academic writing, criticality, depth, voice.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing- writing as practiced in the academy- is crucial for one's academic and professional success as well as social identities (Hyland, 2009, 2011). It is "perhaps the most important skill that second language students need" (Hyland, 2013: 427) because it is not only required to demonstrate their learning but also to construct knowledge. Similarly, through writing, second language (L2) students learn to construct texts, gain content knowledge, and learn language conventions of the texts in question (Canagarajah, 2011). Moreover, writing helps students in the process of 'languaging' that is using language for making meaning, shaping knowledge and experience, and transforming thoughts (Swain, 2006). There are different factors that need to be taken into

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consideration in academic writing. These factors include: critical thinking, depth, voice/stance, vocabulary, rhetorical moves and originality. The main aim of the research is to explore criticality, depth and stance/voice in academic writing. More specifically the research aimed to answer the following questions:

- (1) What do criticality, depth and stance/voice mean in academic writing?
- (2) How were those expectations met in doing the assignment, *Application of an SLA theory and research for your teaching practice?*

METHODOLOGY

The study was based on ethnographic research design with the aim of being able “to consider sociocultural as well as textual and personal factors: the variety of issues that influence what happens in the production of a specific text” (Johns, 1997: 101). Understanding textual and personal factors can be useful in academic writing in real-life situations to get a membership of a disciplinary community. The three aspects- criticality, depth and stance/voice- have been discussed in terms of ideas taken from published literature, class lecture and interview with the unit of study coordinator. Examples from the assignment are used to illustrate the discussion of the aspect in question.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CRITICALITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

The word ‘critical’ appears in different forms and collocations in academic writing such as critical thinking, critical evaluation, critical review, critical analysis, critical perspective, critical essays, critical voice, critical questions, critical argument, write critical writing, and critical evaluation to name but a few. Highlighting critical thinking, Allison and Mei (2001) write, “the importance of critical thinking along with creativity and originality has been widely proclaimed in education circle” (p. 52). Such proclamation of criticality is reflected in unit of study outlines as one of the requirements for assessment criteria such as “does the assignment show that you are able to think critically” (Stevenson, 2015a: 8), “evidence of original/critical thinking and analysis” (Phakiti, 2015a: 6), and university’s expectation towards its graduates that is to “be able to exercise critical judgement and critical thinking in creating new understanding” (University of Sydney, 2004, “Academic Board Resolutions: Generic Attributes of Graduates of the University of Sydney”, 4.3.1). Similarly, one of the main criteria for the evaluation of thesis and dissertation produced by graduate or post graduate students is ‘criticality’ (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat and Dally, 2004; Kumar and Stracke, 2011).

Therefore, graduate and postgraduate students need to understand the meaning of criticality in academic writing in its different forms and collocations.

Fulwiler (2002) suggests that critical writing is about asking as many reporter's questions (such as who? what? why? how? when?) as possible before accepting anything. Hyland (2003) agrees with Fulwiler (2002) in saying that critical thinking has to do with questioning, judging, and recombining ideas and information into an argument and asking questions like why? how? how valid? and how important? Criticality is simple originality in comparison to creative originality. Critical point of view is informed, complex, interpretative and persuasive. Similarly, Bruce (2014) considers criticality to be "an evaluative judgement made within any field of human activity about some aspect, object or behavior of that field" (p. 85). Critical evaluation, according to Allison and Mei (2001), most importantly focuses on the question of "Why should I believe it?" (p. 56). Hirsh (2015a) also underscores the importance of asking questions in developing critical thinking and compares development of criticality in academic writing with climbing a mountain- a long journey which requires persistence, dedication and continuous learning. The common theme found in the literature discussed above is that criticality in academic writing is about asking questions from multiple perspectives and it is in contrast with taking things for granted.

Paltridge (2004), based on his review of existing literature, points out that 'critical thinking' in academic writing has been a contentious issue as some scholars consider it to be a universal construct while others take it to be culture specific issue. Therefore, it is incumbent upon university graduates to understand what criticality means in the context of their institution. For getting an emic perspective regarding this aspect the unit of study coordinator, was interviewed. Regarding critical thinking in doing assignments in *Second Language Acquisition*, the coordinator explained:

When it comes to critical thinking and critical reading, I think that is when you make evaluative judgement about something. You need to really have some kind of criteria to judge what you have read in terms of "can it be trusted? For example, you can read a research article which used a language test but the researchers never reported the reliability of the test, they never tell you how they developed the test and so on and they say that there is a relationship between that test and something. Even though they say that, you cannot trust that unless you know the reliability of the test. You cannot make more informed decisions. The test is not reliable. That's an example of critical thinking.

The following example shows my critical reflection of the applicability of strategy instruction in Nepalese context.

The studies reviewed above have shown that there is positive relationship between strategy instruction and awareness and use of reading strategies. Similarly, the studies have demonstrated that

strategy instruction can promote reading comprehension of EFL learners. Both the models (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach-hereafter CALLA and Reciprocal teaching) of strategy instruction applied in the studies reviewed above can be applied for promoting reading comprehension of EFL Nepalese learners to make them responsible and independent readers because in the long run not the answers to comprehension questions based on texts discussed in the class but the ability to read independently does matter. However, teachers should be trained in using models of strategy instruction before they are expected to do so in their respective classes. It seems to be plausible to incorporate a component of strategy instruction in teacher training or education program (Chamot, 2008; Oxford *et al.*, 2014).

DEPTH IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Like criticality, depth is another recurring theme in academic writing. It is highlighted in unit of study outlines as one of the assessment criteria such as “Depth and understanding of knowledge” (Hirsh, 2015b: 4) and “depth of treatment of the subject matter, range and depth of reading and research” (Phakiti, 2015a: 8). These requirements are in line with the expectation from postgraduate students who are expected to extend knowledge, and present new ideas in creative and original manner (Paltridge *et al.*, 2009). This demand entails students to have in-depth, detailed and thorough understanding of the subject matter in question. Depth in writing requires in-depth reading along with note taking, summarizing and paraphrasing of few key sources identified in the process of exploratory reading (Henning, Gravett, and Van Rensburg, 2005). Such in-depth reading is essential for analyzing, synthesizing and problematizing issue and asking good questions that lead to the extension of knowledge. Postgraduate students’ depth in academic writing can be reflected in the way they integrate perspectives of different authors and writers by attributing to the sources properly (by using required convention) (Creme and Lea, 2008). They should be able to integrate multiple sources to support their own ideas. In this sense, criticality and depth are closely related. Criticality comes through reading multiple sources, analyzing and synthesizing disparate ideas and presenting ideas with new perspective, for which depth in reading is prerequisite.

As mentioned earlier, wider exploration of literature in the area in question is required for getting into depth in academic writing. For this purpose, encyclopedias might be useful for identifying authoritative authors and researchers along with their key publications; books written by top authors for gaining detailed and trustworthy knowledge; and journals for current research and areas in need of further exploration (Henning *et al.*, 2005). The Internet can provide all sorts of materials but one should be careful with the credibility of such sources, which is a part

of the Internet literacy. The term web itself implies that one can be a fly or a spider in it.

Sometimes reading different sources and urge to integrate them all may lead to superficiality in writing. Therefore, it is of great importance to maintain balance between breadth and depth. In this regard, the course coordinator highlighted the need for prioritizing the focus and said:

If there are multiple aspects, it would be better to prioritize two to three and work around them. We can just mention the research done in the area and choose to discuss some of them in detail. We can also mention different issues such 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd', and 'e' and say that for this assignment only 'a' and 'b' will be discussed. Therefore, in this case depth means identifying certain specific issues and discussing them in depth in that area. Multiple sources that are integrated in the assignment should be related to the same issue.

In my assignment *Role of Strategy Instruction in English as Foreign Language Reading*, I, first, selected the area of learning strategies. While reading books (Griffiths, 2008; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, 2011), I found the concept of strategy instruction. Then I searched database for articles on strategy instructions and found that strategy instruction can be related to listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary. It was not possible to discuss all these areas in an assignment which had limitation of 2250 words. Therefore, I decided to choose strategy instruction on EFL reading. As there are many strategies, I had to limit myself further to some specific strategies, which lead me to cognitive and/or metacognitive strategies. In my further exploration, I found various models of strategy instruction. Finally, I prioritized two models: CALLA model (Chamot, 2008) and Reciprocal teaching method (Palincsar and Brown, 1984) and selected three empirical articles (Aghaie and Zhang, 2012; Dabarera, Renandya and Zhang, 2014; Kim and Cha, 2015) to review as required in the assignment.

The following example shows how the area was specified for going into depth in a specific issue.

Interest in strategy instruction is as old as the interest in language learning strategies. Rubin's (1975) underlying motive was to help weak learners enhance their success by teaching them the strategies of successful learners. Oxford (1990) highlights that strategy training can benefit not only poor learners but also the best learners. However, for such strategy training to be effective, learners need to be made aware of the procedures and the reasons for using strategies and their attitude towards self-regulation should be taken into consideration. Among the different models of strategy instruction Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) model (Chamot, 2008) and Reciprocal teaching method (Palincsar and Brown, 1984) have been used in the empirical studies reviewed in the next section. CALLA model has six different stages: preparation (teacher identifying students' current learning strategies), presentation (teacher modeling,

naming and presenting new strategies), practice (students practicing new strategies), self-evaluation (students evaluating their own strategies), expansion (transfer of strategies to new tasks), and assessment (teacher evaluating the use and impact of strategies) (Chamot, 2008). Similarly, in reciprocal teaching method of strategy instruction, the teacher works as a model in guiding the students to interact with the text in more sophisticated ways by using strategies. Two of the studies (Aghaie and Zhang, 2012; Kim and Cha, 2015) have followed CALLA model while one study (Dabarera *et al.*, 2014) has followed reciprocal teaching method for strategy instruction in EFL reading.

VOICE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Voice or stance in academic writing refers to writer's own argument or conclusion or identity which is "normally based on evidence or reasoning, including your own use of relevant and appropriate sources" (Creme and Lea, 2008, 99). Hennings *et al.* (2005) argue in the similar vein when they say "One cannot take a stance or a viewpoint if one does not know the literature" (p. 93) because "writing requires listening to and being guided by the voices of others" (Murray and Moore, 2006: 7), which develops writers' confidence and willingness to present their own voices, perspectives, and interpretations. Writing is, therefore, not only presenting others ideas but identifying connections and making comparison between different perspectives and point of views.

However, novices in the field of academic writing find it difficult to articulate their own point of view. However, they should be optimistic that they can bring something new to the conversation informed by the literature (Murray and Moore, 2006). According to Abasi and Graves (2008), critical stance suggests "a strong link between academic authorship and the development of arguments" (225).

One of the issues clearly associated with voice is the use of first person personal pronouns such as 'I' 'me' and 'my' in academic writing. There is considerable debate whether first person should be used in academic writing with Australia and British universities giving more priority to impersonality and objectivity in writing while American universities taking more moderate view in this case (Richards and Miller, 2005). Use of the first-person pronoun is associated with the agency of the writers in the argument or point of view they are presenting. Though traditionally, passive sentences were preferred in academic writing, students can make use of active sentences with first person pronoun while describing something they did themselves, presenting their reflection and giving personal perspective on certain issues (Stevenson, 2015b; Hirsh, 2015a).

Regarding the use of first person personal pronouns in an assignment, the unit of study coordinator said:

This (the use of first person pronoun) I think you don't want to avoid because it would be stronger if you use 'my' 'me' or 'I'. Somewhat this is your reflection. You don't want to say in comparison to the author's experience. It is too formal. It does not communicate well. So, in that section (while writing reflection) you don't want to avoid using 'I' 'my' etc. However, while discussing literature, it is better to avoid using first person personal pronouns.

Therefore, in the assignment I made use of first person personal pronouns while giving my own opinion as shown in the following example:

Strategy instruction seems to be applicable in Nepalese context where English is a foreign language and taught as a compulsory subject right from grade one to bachelor level. As my own experience of teaching English in various levels has shown, students consider English language to be a subject rather than a language to be learned and the assessment system mostly based on examination seems to be promoting the same. When it comes to reading, students tend to prefer their teachers reading and explaining texts to them as well as providing answers to comprehension questions that follow the texts. I myself have frustrating experience of trying to make learners read independently because, in the first place, they do not consider it to be a good way of doing things and, in the second place, the course cannot be completed on time. Though there is no point in completing the course without students' learning, it makes teachers feel that they have fulfilled their responsibility. The whole education system not only the teachers and students are responsible for this plight. In this context, I see the real possibility of applying strategy instruction in schools as well as in university level to start making impact in real grassroots level.

However, while discussing the literature, I mostly made use of passive sentences because I am not the authority figure on the things I am talking about. In that section, my voice is mostly based on others' voices. The following example illustrates this:

The effectiveness of strategy instruction in raising the awareness and use of reading strategies and their impact in developing reading comprehension can be evaluated in different ways. Awareness and use of learning strategies which are mostly unobservable (Chamot, 2008) can be assessed by using interviews, think-aloud protocols, questionnaires, observations, learning logs, dialog journals, and learner narratives (Oxford *et al.*, 2014). Interviews can be introspective or stimulated recall. In introspective interviews the learners are asked to describe what they are thinking while doing a reading task while in stimulated recall, students are asked to comment on certain aspects of video-tape played back to them after completing the task. Similarly, questionnaire can be the most efficient way of identifying learners' use of reading strategies. Students can also be asked to keep diaries and journal for recording their own observation of their use of strategies. In think-aloud protocol technique learners are given a task and asked to provide their thoughts while doing the task. The studies reviewed above have used questionnaire, think-aloud protocol and interview for identifying the use of learning strategies. Similarly, the effectiveness of strategy instruction in developing reading comprehension can be evaluated by using reading comprehension tests.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored three different expectations-criticality, depth and voice- in academic writing by following an ethnographic method of research that is exploring something as a member of a community. Secondary literature, interview with the unit study coordinator, and an assignment of SLA were used as the sources of data. The information collected from different sources has shown that criticality, highly proclaimed expectation in academic writing, refers to asking questions from multiple perspectives before accepting something. Similarly, depth refers to getting detailed and thorough understanding of the subject matter in question. For getting into depth of anything, it is necessary to identify specific issues. Exploratory reading of wider literature available in the field and in depth reading of specific issues in question help to bring depth in academic writing. The next pertinent issue explored in this research is voice which means being able to integrate voices of different authors, compare them, interpret them and come up with new understanding. Voice in academic writing is almost always shaped by others' voices and use of first person personal pronouns is permissible depending on the context. This research has highlighted the importance of making informed decision in academic writing. Despite the importance academic writing, there is virtually no research conducted in Nepal focusing on expectation of academic writing. Therefore, the lack of research in this area warrants further research.

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