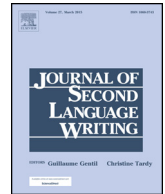


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Short Communication

Writing academic english as a doctoral student in sweden: narrative perspectives



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ABSTRACT

The expectation that doctoral students publish during their studies has increased in recent years. The standard of having international academic publications before entering the job market has long been perceived to pose an even greater challenge to doctoral students in non-English speaking countries who are often expected to publish in English, rather than their national language. This deficient perspective has, however, recently been questioned. We undertook a narrative inquiry at a Swedish university in order to better understand the experience, self-perception, and needs of doctoral students writing academic English. From these narratives, two themes relating to the doctoral students' journeys towards academic writing emerged: deficit and commonality. After reviewing the data, we argue that it is important to support doctoral students in their journey into bi-literate academic writers, rather than focus on the notion of the privileged position of the native speaker.

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Rigorous competition for early career academic positions demands proof *of* (in addition to potential *for*) research excellence, often in the form of published peer-reviewed articles (Kamler, 2008). Several researchers have argued that this standard poses an even greater challenge in non-English speaking countries where academics are often expected to publish in English, rather than their national language (Flowerdew, 2008; Kwan, 2010; Lillis and Curry, 2010); writing in a non-native language has been reported to result in anxiety (Wellington, 2010). More recently, Hyland (2016a) has suggested that the “crude Native vs non-Native polarization” (p. 59) in academic writing for publication needs to be more nuanced. There is, in his view, an assumption in writing for publication scholarship of “linguistic injustice” (p. 59), whereby L2 writers are viewed as unfairly disadvantaged in academic for publication. This assumption deserves further interrogation as it may serve to mask any common problems faced by all writers in English—L1, L2 or otherwise—and to further undermine the capabilities of L2 writers.

In this paper, we contribute to this discussion by bringing a narrative inquiry approach to the voices and experiences of early doctoral students in Sweden in a faculty of humanities. Narrative inquiry has been used to consider the entire doctoral student experience in the UK (Brown, 2009) and Australia (Cotterall, 2011). Our aim is to apply such an approach particularly to the writing journey and self-perceptions of writing in an L2-environment with little or no L1 support.

The pressure to publish in English has a “flow-on effect” on doctoral students (Kwan, 2010). Thus, as doctoral researchers are just beginning to grasp their projects, they are increasingly expected to publish in English in international peer-reviewed journals, either as part of their Ph.D.-by-publication or in addition to their dissertations (Salö, 2010, 2016). In non-English speaking countries, such as Sweden, where this case study is placed, doctoral students find themselves having to make

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strategic decisions about whether to write their theses in English or a national language, and whether to publish articles in English during their doctoral registration. While it is true that Swedish senior high school students generally have an English language competence that is among the best in Europe (Erickson, 2004), this does not mean that English academic writing for publication is not perceived by the doctoral students as a challenging “practice of a literary elite” (Hyland, 2016a, p. 67).

Continuing concerns about how best to support doctoral researchers who are negotiating this context in the humanities in Sweden have led to many courses in academic writing, many workshops on specific aspects of academic writing, and doctoral student online journals that publish work in English. A substantial amount of research focuses on second language teaching and writing, as well as how researchers in Sweden perceive using a second language to convey their results (Bolton and Kuteeva, 2012; Kuteeva & McGrath, 2014; Olsson and Sheridan, 2012).

Doctoral students' routes into academic English also vary: native English speakers at English-speaking universities (L1-L1), non-native speakers of English at English-speaking universities (L2-L1), and non-native speakers of English at non-English-speaking universities (L2-L2), where the ambient, day-to-day language is another language. The relative importance of sources of learning support, for example, fundamental grammar/style classes and content-focused tutorial feedback where writing support is secondary, reflect these different circumstances. Furthermore, the support provided (and required) varies not only between ambient context but also between individuals.

1. Context for the study

Recent reform of higher education in Sweden (Högskoleförordning, 1993: revised, Förordning om ändring i högskoleförordning, 2006) acknowledges the importance of generic and transferable skills for the doctorate, specifically referring to writing with authority in dialogue with the academic community. To support these aims, Sweden is following a European trend toward the introduction of graduate schools which focus on the development of general academic and professional skills (Park, 2007; Poole, 2012). Where recent scholarship has identified some of the challenges and drawbacks of exclusive one-on-one supervision (Harrison and Grant, 2015; Manathunga & Goozée, 2007), doctoral research schools enable other training constellations.

This study is situated at such a graduate school that offers three short courses and frequent workshops focusing on general academic and professional skills and totalling 10 weeks of credits that can count towards the course element of doctoral degrees. The courses focus on, for example: career planning and documentation; project leadership and management, and developing a dissertation. However, writing instruction is neither consistent nor well-established – there is no dedicated academic writing course at the doctoral level. In our experiences in Sweden, and we suspect the same is true in other L2-L2 settings where English is not the ambient language of either the society or the academy, much of the teaching of academic writing is driven by English proficiency teaching.

Little is known about doctoral researcher perspectives, including their self-articulated needs and journey into academic writing in English, as well as their perceptions of the challenges of the native vs. non-native academic writer. We, therefore, approached early humanities doctoral researchers at a Swedish university to discover the key characteristics of their route into English academic writing. Our aims contribute to the discussion around L2 deficit (Hyland 2016a, b; Politzer-Ahles, Holliday, Girolamo, Spsychalska, & Berkson, 2016). The information gleaned from the narratives helps us to better understand the experiences and assumptions of doctoral researchers surrounding the development of their writing skills and concomitantly, to better tailor graduate academic writing support and pedagogy.

2. Methodology

In order to investigate doctoral researchers' perceptions of their particular writing needs, we employ a narrative approach to generate detailed descriptions that would not have been possible using questionnaires. We do not want to restrict or lead the participants as we felt would have been more likely in questionnaire or interview format. Written narratives allow the doctoral researchers more freedom and flexibility to construct their thoughts, than structured interviews and questionnaires. Narrative inquiry also permits the investigation of individual perspectives that both may differ from those who teach academic writing and that constitute a heterogeneous group. Among others, Guerin, Kerr and Green (2014), and Trahar (2011, 2014) have used this methodology for similarly stated purposes.

Our use of narrative approach also allows us to understand whether doctoral researchers in English as a foreign language and L2-L2 contexts have individual needs that are, indeed, unique to these contexts. Furthermore, we investigate whether the doctoral researchers perceive the writing support provided as being driven by a linguistic deficit perspective or as being focused on the acquisition of the literacy style of academic writing for publication. Both of these findings will contribute to improvements in doctoral education.

Following the Swedish Research Council's ethics requirements (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011), we approached a group of first-year doctoral researchers who were about to participate in a one-day workshop on academic writing and asked them to write about their journey into English academic writing:

Before next week's workshop we want you to prepare between 400 and 800 words where you narrate your journey towards writing academic English and the challenges and possibilities it creates for your research and English language texts.

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