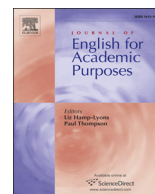




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# Conventions in postgraduate academic writing: European students' negotiations of prior writing experience at an English speaking university<sup>☆</sup>



Kathrin Kaufhold

Department of English, Stockholm University SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

Postgraduate writing in the social sciences increasingly challenges the conventions of a model derived from the natural sciences. In addition, postgraduate second-language students usually bring with them prior experiences in academic writing which influences their writing development. Taking an Academic Literacies perspective, this ethnographically-informed case study combines and extends these lines of research in the specific context of student mobility in the European Higher Education Area. It investigates how Continental European master's students negotiate their prior experiences of academic writing when completing their theses at a UK university. The detailed analysis of three cases reveals that the students' initial understandings of academic English conventions as autonomous rules became increasingly depended on their disciplinary knowledge and the epistemological approaches of their theses. The results further highlight that the way students draw on prior experiences of academic English relates to their aims. In the light of their experiences, students might both challenge and actively preserve formal conventions of academic English. The findings suggest the need for EAP instructors and subject supervisors to adopt a balanced approach to scaffolding postgraduate academic writing and the importance of supportive institutional structures.

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## 1. Introduction

Postgraduate academic writing in English is an area that is fraught with uncertainties about writing conventions for second language (L2) writers. Especially in the social sciences, academic writing practices are less clearly conventionalised (Biber & Gray, 2010; Chang & Swales, 1999; Samraj, 2008) than some textbooks maintain (Paltridge, 2002). With the influence of postmodern thought, alternative ways of constructing knowledge have become more influential in postgraduate academic writing, particularly in the New Humanities (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Starfield & Ravelli, 2006) that provide space for self-reflexive and creative approaches (Hamilton & Pitt, 2009; Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2012). At the same time, there is a pull towards regulation and conservation of a standard often oriented on the science model against which to assess postgraduate writing, such as the master's thesis (Casanave, 2010). In addition, L2 students usually start their thesis project with some prior knowledge of academic writing. These influences have been recognised in research on the development of genre knowledge both in terms of students' transnational trajectories through recurring rhetorical situations (Rounsville, 2014) and students' writing development within disciplinary conventions (Artemeva & Fox, 2010; Tardy, 2009).

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E-mail address: [kathrin.kaufhold@english.su.se](mailto:kathrin.kaufhold@english.su.se).

The current study extends this line of enquiry in the specific context of student mobility in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) where English plays an increasing role as the medium of instruction (Moi) and publication (Coleman, 2006; Lillis & Curry, 2006). European social science students who come to an Anglophone country such as the UK to study for a master's degree will have had some contact with academic English through their course material or potentially as Moi in their Continental European country of study. This article therefore examines how Continental European students negotiate their experiences of academic writing when completing a master's thesis at an English university. It adds to and extends insights on how students' prior experience of academic writing can influence how they understand and apply conventions of academic English writing in their thesis.

## 2. Theoretical background and rationale

The negotiation of prior writing experience in L2 postgraduate writing has been acknowledged in genre-based research of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (see Tardy, 2006 for an overview; Cheng, 2008, 2011). Academic Literacies approaches emphasise the role of “literacy histories” for academic writing (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007). Literacy histories are prior experiences of writing students accumulated while participating in a range of academic practices. The notion of practice underlines the view of writing as situated, cultural phenomenon (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). It thus underscores the institutional and social context of academic writing, that is, how writing is shaped by its context, for example by assessment requirements, and how it shapes contexts, for example by perpetuating discipline-specific ways of knowledge construction in writing a specific master's thesis.

While context has been considered across EAP research traditions (e.g. Casanave, 2002; Cheng, 2011; Coffin & Donohue, 2012; Paltridge & Woodrow, 2012; Swales, 1998), a practice perspective underlines that students are active participants in the instantiation of a genre such as the master's thesis even if they are arguably less powerful than their assessors. Literacy histories are, therefore, not only viewed in terms of how students adapt to the language of academia (Blommaert, Street, & Turner, 2007; Hyland, 2004), but also how students participate in instantiating academic practices. This perspective chimes with Cheng's (2008, p. 409) call for genre-based EAP instruction to “encompass assessing how students' immediate and long-term learning objectives are driven by their histories and trajectories of learning and how students' agendas of learning affect their access to the ranges and types of generic features.”

How students' literacy histories shape their learning is especially relevant for postgraduate writing where students often possess some prior writing experience at university level. Their experience influences the discursive choices they can make (Schatzki, 2002) within the framework of discipline-specific writing conventions. Research on postgraduate writing development confirms that students have some room for choice in their academic writing (Casanave, 2002). In his study on postgraduate writing in art and design, Paltridge (2004) even observed a master's student who constantly flouted the conventions provided in the explicit course guidelines and still received the best mark. Nevertheless, supervisors open to alternative forms of knowledge making might provide rather conservative, formal advice to their students in order to ensure that the thesis or dissertation meets the standards of an examining panel (Casanave, 2010). Since there is much at stake for the student, instructors on academic writing for L2 students often suggest a formal standard as a safe way (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005).

The influence of literacy histories on postgraduate writing receives further significance in the context of student mobility within the EHEA. With the recent developments of internationalisation and the creation of the EHEA, national tertiary education systems have seen structural changes aiming to achieve comparability. Nevertheless, local interpretations of policies and prevailing national traditions limit this standardisation (Sedgwick, 2011; Sin & Saunders, 2014). In addition, the use of English as academic lingua franca has increased exponentially as medium of instruction and publication (Björkman, 2013; Haberland & Mortensen, 2012; Kuteeva & Mauranen, 2014; Lillis & Curry, 2006). When students from the EHEA decide to accomplish a master's degree at a university in an English L1 country, it is likely that they will have had some exposure to English and possibly their L1 as academic languages. These conditions provide a rich mix of situated academic experiences that constitutes part of their literacy histories.

So far, little attention has been paid to the influence of literacy histories on an understanding and implementation of academic writing conventions in the context of a master's thesis. Equally, there has been little research on the influence of European master's students' literacy histories in their negotiation of conventions when studying at a British university. This study combines these strands and answers the following research question:

How do European students negotiate their prior writing experience when completing a master's thesis at an English university?

- How is this negotiation manifest in the students' texts?
- How do the students construct their negotiation in the research interviews?
- What is the role of the institutional context for this negotiation?

After outlining the methods of data collection and analysis, I present three cases. These cases have been selected from a wider study on master's thesis writing. The selection is based on how students construct their negotiations in the interviews in relation to manifestations in their texts on three levels: lexical, discursive and structural.

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