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## HELPING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS TO LEARN «THE RULES OF THE GAME» IN AND THROUGH THE THESIS WRITING PROCESS IN ENGLISH\*

**Резюме.** Обсуждается важность понимания академического письма пользователями английского языка как иностранного, как процесса, а не, как часто это воспринимается, продукта. Только посредством письменной деятельности студенты смогут приобрести четкое научное понимание, которое пригодится им в дальнейшем и в университете, и после окончания его. Письменный процесс управляется так называемыми «правилами игры», т. е. имплицитными правилами, которые развиваются с течением времени. Данные правила определяют, как текст будет прочитан, понят и оценен членами определенного академического сообщества. Текст, таким образом, – это часть социальной практики, посредством и с помощью которой мы демонстрируем наш процесс изучения. Цель преподавателей должна заключаться в стимулировании постоянного обучения через всю жизнь. Это особенно важно на уровне магистерской или докторской диссертации, что является кульминацией университетской карьеры и что будет способствовать вступлению студента в его/ее выбранное сообщество и профессию.

**Ключевые слова:** студент аспирантуры и магистратуры; социокультурная практика; английский как иностранный язык; принадлежность к научному сообществу; «правила игры»; обучение через всю жизнь.

**Abstract.** This article discusses the importance of regarding academic writing for English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) users as a process and not just, as is often the case, a product, because it is through writing that students are enabled to acquire a distinct scholarly identity that will serve them well both at university and after. The writing process is governed by so-called «rules of the game», i. e. implicit rules, developed over time, that determine how a text will be read, understood and evaluated by the members of a particular academic community. A text is thus a piece of social practice through which, and by which, we demonstrate our learning. Our goal as teachers must be to promote life-long learning. Nowhere is this more important than in the Master's or doctoral thesis – the culmination of a university career that will hopefully initiate the student into his/her chosen community and profession.

**Key words:** postgraduate; socio-cultural practice; English-as-a-Foreign Language; scholarly identity; «rules of the game»; life-long learning.

### Introduction

As English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students approach the daunting task of writing a Master's or a doctoral thesis in English, their knowledge of the rules of scholarship is limited, not least with regard to the writing of academic texts. These texts are «pieces of social practice», shaped by a particular kind of academic public and by distinct rules of scholarship that have been developed over time. As they are often implicit rather than explicit, they are difficult to identify. Our task as supervisors is not only to enable students to produce a text of high scholarly standard – an important task in its own right, of course, but also, as we share with our students our experience of Academia, to promote the development of a distinct scholarly identity that is the pre-condition for life-long learning and a successful post-university career.

There is a growing recognition among scholars that academic writing at all levels is as much a process as a product (Mattisson 2012, 23–30). An important aspect of this process, particularly at the postgraduate level, is facilitating students' development of scholarly identity through writing. While there are numerous publications on academic writing in English, Master's and doctoral theses are a relatively neglected area; the many texts published about postgraduate supervision, including some of the best-known, e. g. Bartlett and Mercer (2001), Delamont Atkinson and Parry (2000), Phillips and Pugh (1987) and Wisker (2004), devote surprisingly little attention to writing-centred supervision, and frequently fail to address the creation of identity through the writing process. Most books on postgraduate supervision also tend to focus on the student rather than on the supervisor (Kamler and Thomson 2006, 1). As Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson (2006) clearly demonstrate, however, «the issue of getting the dissertation written is as problematic for supervisors as it is for doctoral

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students» (p. 1). Supervisors criticise students for turgid prose, poorly constructed arguments and unfocused literature reviews that lack relevance to the argument.

Traditionally, the focus in postgraduate supervision has been on writing up results and the quality of the final product in terms of both content and structure, including its contribution to research in the field. The present paper, however, focuses on the creation of identity in and through the writing process, particularly with regard to how the supervisor can enable EFL students to project their personal view of reality through writing; this is part of the process of creating a scholarly identity that not only provides a firm basis for future work but also enables the student to become a productive member of his/her scholarly community.

### Theory

Torrance and Thomas demonstrate that students who fail to complete their thesis frequently do so as a result of writing-related issues (Torrance and Thomas 1994, 105–124). Failure to complete the thesis is particularly challenging where both supervisor and student are EFL users, because cultural issues and expectations as well as linguistic weaknesses may contribute to misunderstandings and significant delays in the writing process. As Kamler and Thomson (2006) note, universities are increasingly aware of the need to support supervisors in their work; however, the focus thus far has been on quality assurance and training, issues which are frequently addressed at workshops and in seminars. Supervisors are under increasing pressure to pass students and to provide a smooth passage from enrolment to graduation.

Before this is possible, however, EFL users must first deal with more basic problems such as those encountered at sentence and paragraph level; students may also, as Bitchener and Basturkmen demonstrate, find it particularly difficult to understand and meet the special characteristics and requirements of the thesis genre as defined by the host university (Bitchener and Basturkmen 2006, 7). The literature review and discussion of results sections pose special problems as they require a high level of thinking as well as language: if the language is weak, this restricts the student's ability to balance a range of ideas and results and to synthesise these into a discussion that adequately reflects the student's own thinking; this leads both to a lack of coherence and authoritative voice (Kamler and Thomson 2006, chs. 6–9).

As Kamler and Thomson argue, supervisors often consider assistance with writing to be outside the supervisory relationship (Kamler and Thomson 2006, 10). This is a significant problem because an important aspect of the student's scholarly identity is neglected. Indeed, texts should be viewed as «an extension of the scholar, a putting of "self" out there which is either successful or not» (Kamler and Thomson 2006, 15), as they are evaluated both by peers and examiners. Identity incorporates class, gender, race and ethnicity, dis/ability, age, location and religion (Kamler and Thomson 2006, 16–17). As Brodin emphasises, without developing «scholarly identity in doctoral students, their chances of obtaining eulogized creativity in academia are not promising» (Brodin 2011, 143). Scholarly identity and writing are all about gaining credibility in academia – and these go hand-in-hand (Johns 1995, 277–291; Lacina 2002, 117–327).

### Fairclough's three dimensions of discourse

The three levels of discourse, (defined as «the way language is used») outlined by Norman Fairclough (Kamler and Thomson 2006, 19–23), namely text, discourse practice and socio-cultural practice provide a useful theoretical framework for the present discussion. At its most concrete level, the text (Fairclough's layer one), is the spoken or written language used both by supervisor and student. It is also an instance of discourse practice (layer two) that involves the production and interpretation of text. At its most abstract level, level three, the text is a piece of social practice, shaped by a particular kind of academic public and the rules of scholarship that have been developed over time. A number of these rules are unspoken. It is the supervisor's task to ensure that the student is acquainted with all, or at least, the most important of these.

### Helping our students to develop a scholarly identity as a basis for life-long learning

Supportive and friendly relations between supervisor and student promote academic critique. For students to feel secure, they must be given clear guidelines regarding the parameters for doctoral supervision, i. e. how often and for how long the student and supervisor can meet, when and in what form(s) the student may expect feedback, and the consequences of failing to meet deadlines being the most significant. On a more specific level, students require clear guidelines with respect to identifying and narrowing down their topic and aim/problem, identifying and searching suitable databases, establishing a suitable method (Richards, Christopher, Carter, Candlin and Ronald 2012), processing and presenting data, structuring the thesis, writing an abstract and introduction, contextualising their topic, identifying and discussing suitable theories, analysing and discussing data, compiling recommendations as well as directions for future research, and writing a comprehensive and accurate list of references.

Students must also be introduced to useful phrases and expressions in English that are relevant to the different sections of the thesis outlined in the paragraph above. A useful reference here is *The Academic Phrasebook* developed by Manchester University (see <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/methods.htm>). This phrasebook is not discipline-specific and very comprehensive. Alternatively, the supervisor may compile his/her own phrasebook (Paltridge and Starfield 2007).

As a supervisor of both Master's and doctoral students, I present my students with a set of guidelines covering all the areas identified above. These are distributed at different stages of the writing process. At the

first meeting, it is advisable to present the student with a supervision contract, in which the goals for both student and supervisor are clearly specified, and where deadlines are identified. The supervision contract should be signed by *both* parties, as it is a mutual obligation.

It should be emphasised throughout the supervision process that writing is as much a process as it is a product. Each section of the thesis is completed and submitted to the supervisor for critique. The latter takes the form of written as well as oral feedback. Written feedback predominates in the initial stages. At the beginning of the writing process, the student attends a group and/or individual tutorial to discuss the text with his/her supervisor. The text is then revised and re-submitted.

The supervisor's written feedback takes two basic forms: *summative*, which evaluates the text as a product, and *formative*, that points forwards to the student's future writing and the development of his/her writing strategies (Lea and Street 2000, 32–46). As the thesis progresses, formative feedback becomes more prominent not only because students' language has developed in response to the earlier given summative feedback but because it becomes increasingly important to introduce the student both to the rules that determine how a thesis should be written and the expectations of the scholarly reader.

In addition to critique from the supervisor, students can learn from fellow students. Peer reviewing, in which a student is paired with another student, is an excellent method for developing self-critique. Peers need to be issued with peer review guidelines, which identify what the student should pay attention to in terms of structure, content, language, style and tone. My guidelines are based on Lennart Björk and Christine Räisinen's *Academic Writing. A University Course* (Björk and Räisinen 2003). Peer review guidelines can be used for all kinds of texts, including reports, conference presentations, scholarly texts and business documents. The guidelines should be kept for future reference.

An important part of the process of writing and the creation of scholarly identity for life-long learning is the editing process – a process whose significance is frequently underestimated by students. The deadlines for the different sections of the thesis must allow for ample time for revision of the language, content, style and tone. Revision should normally result in a reduction in the length of the thesis, whereby repetitions, irrelevant details and unnecessarily convoluted constructions are removed. Special attention should be paid to style and tone, to ensure that these are academic, correct and consistent. By reading parts of the thesis out loud, the student is better able to hear inconsistencies in these areas.

A thesis written in English, irrespective of whether it is produced within the discipline of English itself or within another discipline, must be accurate in terms of language as well as adopt an appropriate style and tone. This is not easy to achieve even for the native speaker; for the EFL writer, it is a major challenge. The writing process is gradual and long-term. Students need to be reminded that the language is part of the message and will determine to a significant extent the way in which the reader judges the quality of the text. We owe it to our students to understand this as early as possible in the writing process.

In addition to the mechanics of the thesis discussed above, students need to be introduced gradually to what Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1988) describes as «the rules of the game», i. e. the unwritten laws and principles that govern how a text is produced and presented so that it will be accepted by the academic community for which it is intended. What are the expectations of this community in terms of structure, content, layout and language? What is the appropriate response when one receives critique? Is it permissible to reject critique, and if so, what might be the consequences? From what sources might funding be secured to attend conferences? What happens after the thesis has been approved and defended? What are the career options open to the student on completion of his/her thesis? Where can one find journals willing to publish future work in the field? How does one go about making contacts in one's chosen community? All of these areas need to be addressed during the supervision process – and constitute an important part of «the rules of the game».

These rules are particularly problematical because they vary from discipline to discipline and from institution to institution. The supervisor must initiate his/her students into a new culture, in which the rules may initially appear to be inscrutable, or at least, perhaps, illogical. Supervisors need to share with their students their experiences of conferences, applying for funding and publishing, and should discuss successes and failures in all areas of academic life. In this way, students learn to understand the special nature of the rules and the evaluation processes that apply to Academia.

## Conclusion

All three layers of Fairclough's model: the text (level one), discourse practice (layer two), and level three, «socio-cultural practice» must be borne in mind when supervising postgraduate students since student identity is produced primarily in and through the writing of the Master's or doctoral thesis. For this process to be efficient, it is necessary to bring the «socio-cultural practice» element to the fore, particularly with regard to the spoken as well as unspoken rules of scholarship. It is the third layer of Fairclough's model that is most problematical because it is less visible. More research needs to be conducted into how the doctoral student's home culture – national as well as academic – influences the production of the doctoral thesis itself. How does a doctoral student learn the rules of scholarship for which his/her text is intended, especially if it is different to his/her own? Where rules are unspoken, how are they best communicated to the doctoral student? How can we improve on the way in which we prepare a doctoral student for active participation in a community of practice of which the student has little or no previous experience?

The creation and strengthening of scholarly identity is crucial at postgraduate level. This identity is never individual, it is plural; it is never fixed but always in a process of being formed; it is continually made and re-made *in* and *as* action, and it is discursively formed. It is thus not only the final product that is important but the process by which it has been achieved. Nowhere is scholarly identity more important than in the Master's or doctoral thesis, which is, after all, the start of what, hopefully, will be a long and fruitful career either as a scholar or a member of some other kind of professional community.

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