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Academic writing for research and publication

Syed Waqar Ali Shah helps his students to develop academic writing skills

Introduction

As an instructor in EAP courses and a research supervisor in ELT and Applied Language Studies over the last five years in Pakistan, I have often felt that most of my students (postgraduate researchers) do not self-reflect on what they write. They just send their assignments, research proposals or dissertation chapters to their supervisors for comments without making sure that the text is organised, grammatically correct, coherent, focused, and correctly and relevantly cited. When I receive such texts for comments as a supervisor and/or EAP instructor, I feel my role changing from that of supervisor/instructor to that of editor/proofreader. I correct very basic grammatical errors in written texts produced by students who already have a four-year background at the bachelor's level in English language and literature. My students' inability to write academic texts stems from a lack of self-reflection and a lack of training in academic writing for research and publication. The courses taught in bachelor's studies are often continued in master's and doctoral studies, which do not offer comprehensive training in research and writing.

Writing as a self-reflective activity

Writing is a self-reflective activity. I always consider self-reflection on my writing to be the most important part of the process. I firmly believe that our academic writing can be largely improved through the careful reading and critical appraisal of our own academic texts. I ask myself several questions when I have finished writing. Does my writing convey my thoughts clearly to the audience I am writing for? Is my language grammatically correct? Are my ideas coherently developed? Have I used transitional devices appropriately in the text? Who have I cited? Is the citation relevant and made in accordance with a specific citation manual? These questions help me know where my writing stands, so that I can further refine it before it goes for feedback and review. I revise



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my dissertation drafts, research articles and other assignments multiple times before I send them to my editors, course instructors or supervisors for comments.

However, looking at it from a student's perspective, it works differently. The question that concerns me is whether it is possible to self-reflect without acquiring the basic skills required to write academically? I come up with a simple answer: No! To start to write as a researcher, one needs to learn basic academic writing skills and acquire a body of knowledge relevant to the field.

Access to reliable research

Many suggestions are proposed by researchers to improve academic writing for research purposes. Based on my own experience, I see 'reading' as a foundation for 'good writing'. I always prefer to read peer-reviewed articles published in reputable journals. In the context of Pakistan, since there is no easy or free access to the top-ranked journals in Applied Language Studies or ELT-related research due to the closed access policy of the journals, I

see my students struggling to find peer-reviewed research articles. As a result, they engage in reading from predatory journals, which are not peer reviewed due the financial benefits they earn. Such reading materials are of compromised quality in terms of content, and they have a negative effect on students' writing skills. This is where I see the role of universities and libraries as being important in subscribing to those research journals that are highly influential in the field. Reading from recognised journals not only helps beginning researchers to improve their academic writing skills but also informs them about the developments happening in the field.

To overcome the financial constraint on knowledge, very recently Open Access (OA) Publishing as part of the Open Science movement has made it possible to read and download quality peer-reviewed papers. Students need to be trained to use open access forums, such as the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Frontiers Open Access Publishing, Public Library Science (PLOS) and F1000 – Open Research Platform, which are very useful. In addition, many databases such as Nature Portfolio, ScienceDirect, Web of Science and Scopus have an open access policy. With the availability of open access research articles, in-depth reading of academic work in the field must be the next focus for researchers.



Open Access Publishing gives students access to current research. Photo: RenysView/Shutterstock

Developing academic writing skills

Many students writing up their research fail to differentiate between academic writing and other forms of writing. Thus, when writing a research article or a dissertation, they use slang, contractions, colloquialisms, clichés and other literary devices, which makes their writing sound less academic in tone. To write as a researcher, it is important to become familiar with the academic vocabulary and common expressions to be used. In terms of grammar use, we need to look at the possible grammatical constructions (e.g. passives, tenses) in our writing since our research article or dissertation cannot accommodate all modal auxiliaries and tenses. When I review students' manuscripts, I find many instances of sentence fragments, comma splices and run-on sentences. Students do not produce complete sentences to express their thoughts. They write very long sentences, and sometimes, mispunctuate clauses used in a sentence, which causes misunderstandings in thoughts they want to convey.

More importantly, when it comes to the use of prepositions and articles, students whose first language is not English find these very challenging. In such cases, what I recommend is learning about 'aligned prepositions', an approach which guides researchers to think in terms of chunks and collocations. The collocative use of language plays a key role in the development of appropriacy. The same is applicable to learning about articles instead of learning the discrete rules that determine the correct use of 'a' and 'the'. In current ELT literature, language learning is not bound by rules but is focused on the way language is used in communicative contexts.

In addition to grammatical issues, it is important to check whether our writing is unbiased in terms of gender and representation of other social constructs, such as religion, culture and ethnicity. Academic writing should not be offensive to any social and cultural group. A common concern seen in student writing is the use of gender-biased vocabulary, such as pronouns. For example, many researchers in Pakistan use 'he' to refer to both genders. This use of language is taken for granted and treated as a natural practice rather than socially mediated. Academic writing should be more inclusive in terms of gender. Gender-neutral words need to be included in any academic text so that males and females are equally represented.

Another important problem is related to citation, which needs to be done very carefully by academic writers to acknowledge the sources they refer to. Citing sources avoids unethical practices in research, such as plagiarism. I have seen this as a recurring issue in most of the articles and dissertations produced by my postgraduate students. For example, they fail to differentiate narrative citation from parenthetical citation; they lack familiarity with basic short forms, such as 'et al.' and 'ibid', and they do not bother to give page numbers.

Early-career researchers need training on when to cite and/or quote. Learning the difference between citation and quotation is very important, as is paraphrasing, which is at the heart of citation practice. There are different referencing manuals for different fields. APA is the style most commonly used in research journals in social sciences and humanities, including ELT and Applied Language Studies. Moreover, it is important to check what edition of the manual is to be followed. For instance, the

seventh edition of APA was published in October 2019 and shows some changes when compared with the sixth edition.

In this process of citation, what I practise and recommend to my students is use of online reference tools, such as Mendeley. This is one of the most important tools to help researchers manage references and citation in articles and dissertations. It contains the seventh edition of APA besides other citation manuals. It requires one to create and manage an online library so that the resources are well managed and can be used in citation and references when needed. Similar reference tools include EndNote, RefWorks, Zotero and the MS Word referencing function. Students should pick an easy-to-use referencing tool that they can use to their advantage.

Feedback plays a crucial role in improving academic texts. When we finish writing an article, or any academic text, we should ask ourselves who would be the best person to review our article. We need to check the expertise of the person who will be commenting on the text. In many cases, we see people with poor professional knowledge and limited academic writing skills assessing manuscripts. Writing can be an equally serious problem for teachers and students in EFL/ESL contexts. In such cases, it would be risky to have an article reviewed by someone lacking subject knowledge and academic writing skills. Besides obtaining reviews from experts, peer review also helps in improving the text. Most of the time, our peers read the text very critically and help to highlight problems related to language, coherence and relevance.

Conclusion

To conclude, writing is a well-informed reflective activity, which is possible through hard work and commitment. It requires self-discipline to be able to organise thoughts in a coherent way so that readers find the text interesting. It needs consistent regular practice, in-depth reading, reviews and comments from experts, and timely relevant training in research writing. Early-career researchers can be offered several courses, on topics such as writing academic articles, writing conference abstracts, bringing an academic voice into writing, starting to write as a researcher, giving conference presentations and defending their research on academic forums. These courses will provide the basic training they need to begin their careers as effective researchers.



Peer review is a valuable activity. Photo: Antonio Guillem/Shutterstock