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Shifting Paradigms in Moroccan Higher Education:

A Study on Academic Writing Literacies and the Need for Doctoral-Level Interventions

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Abstract

In recent years, Moroccan higher education has undergone substantial transformations on various fronts. Despite concerted efforts to align with global academic standards, the challenge of academic writing at the doctoral level persists, echoing a global concern that demands urgent attention. This paper delves into the imperative for interventions and paradigm shifts within Moroccan tertiary education to foster academic writing literacies among English as an Additional Language (EAL) doctoral students. To address this issue, the study investigates the self-perceptions of Moroccan doctoral students

regarding their academic writing skills and their awareness of the elements of authorial voice. Employing a qualitative approach, a case-study design, and an exploratory survey, I explored the perspectives of seventeen Moroccan doctoral students from Moulay Ismail Universities in order to gain deeper insights into their self-perceived academic skills, specifically in relation to thesis writing, and academic literacy. The data was collected using convenience sampling and analysed through the parameters of thematic analysis. The study highlights a lack of awareness among doctoral students regarding the elements of authorial voice; an absence of academic writing training programs; and a crucial need for personalized interventions in academic writing instruction. Future research should aim to address the development and assessment of doctoral training programs tailored to effectively nurture students' authorial voices.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Academic Literacies, Moroccan Higher Education, Doctoral writing, Authorial Voice

1. Introduction

Doctoral education is a rigorous journey that does not only require patience and academic prowess but also an impressive command over the art of scholarly writing. The challenge is more serious for doctoral students who write in English as an Additional Language (EAL), since they are required to navigate the intricate balance between linguistic

proficiency and grasping the rhetorical expectations within their respective disciplines. Doctoral students should be able to move beyond using accurate grammar and structure to cultivating their unique authorial voices.

The dissatisfaction expressed by PhD supervisors cannot be overlooked regarding the quality of doctoral writing conducted by their supervisees. This hints at an underlying issue with the prevalent pedagogical approaches in addressing the complexities of advanced academic writing. Furthermore, the data presented in the literature highlighting high dropout rates by doctoral students, particularly at the writing up stage, calls into question the efficacy of the training programs in place.

In Morocco, the diverse academic landscape witnesses a notable absence of insights into how doctoral students perceive and navigate advanced academic writing, especially with regards to the linguistic features of authorial voice. The current study seeks to address this pressing issue through exploring Moroccan doctoral students' awareness of the elements of advanced academic wring, which are in turn the criteria for academic writing literacy, and the constituents for authorial voice. The study also attempts to identify potential interventions that resonate with the needs and preferences of doctoral students, fostering a generation of confident and adept scholarly writers.

2. Literature review

Undertaking a doctoral thesis is unequivocally a process that demands a significant amount of academic writing. Ivanic (1998) emphasizes that doctoral writers are expected to infuse their writing with their unique personal voice, while also acknowledging the rhetorical expectations of their academic discipline (Hirvela and Belcher, 2001). The intricacy of academic writing places L2 writers at a crossroad where they must balance linguistic mastery of the English language and rhetorical understanding of language use within their respective fields. This perspective on academic writing was initially introduced by the academic literacies approach to academic writing.

In essence, the academic literacies movement signalled a paradigm shift in addressing the challenges students encounter with their academic writing. Rather than exclusively concentrating on the problematic linguistic aspects at the surface level of writing, the academic literacy approach delves further into the epistemological issues related to writing. The underlying epistemological aspects of language pertain to how students adeptly construct knowledge within disciplinary contexts (Wingate & Tribble, 2012, p. 483).

Consequently, this shift enabled educators to engage deeper in developing pedagogical strategies that transcend the teaching of basic writing skills, such as grammar and structure. Instead, they sought to comprehend how they could assist students in developing rhetorical and discipline-based strategies that facilitate the integration of their

writing into disciplinary fields. Therefore, the primary objective of academic literacies approaches is to offer alternatives to conventional methods of aiding students in enhancing their academic writing from a critical perspective (Tribble, 2009, p. 403).

The definition I adopt to characterize doctoral academic writing literacy extends beyond mere mechanical language mastery to encompass the manifestation of an authorial voice. We adhere to the definition put forth by Matsuda and Tardy (2007), characterizing voice as 'the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and nondiscursive features that language users choose deliberately or otherwise from socially available yet ever-changing repertoires' (p. 239).

In this study, I aim to introduce, following the academic literacies approach, the components forming the heuristic framework of authorial voice outlined by Olivier and Carstens (2018). This framework serves as the cornerstone of a comprehensive system designed to assess students' awareness of their proficiency in academic writing skills. Below is a simplified heuristic outline of these elements.

Figure 1

A Heuristic Framework by Olivier and Carstens (2018) proposed for voice in academic writing
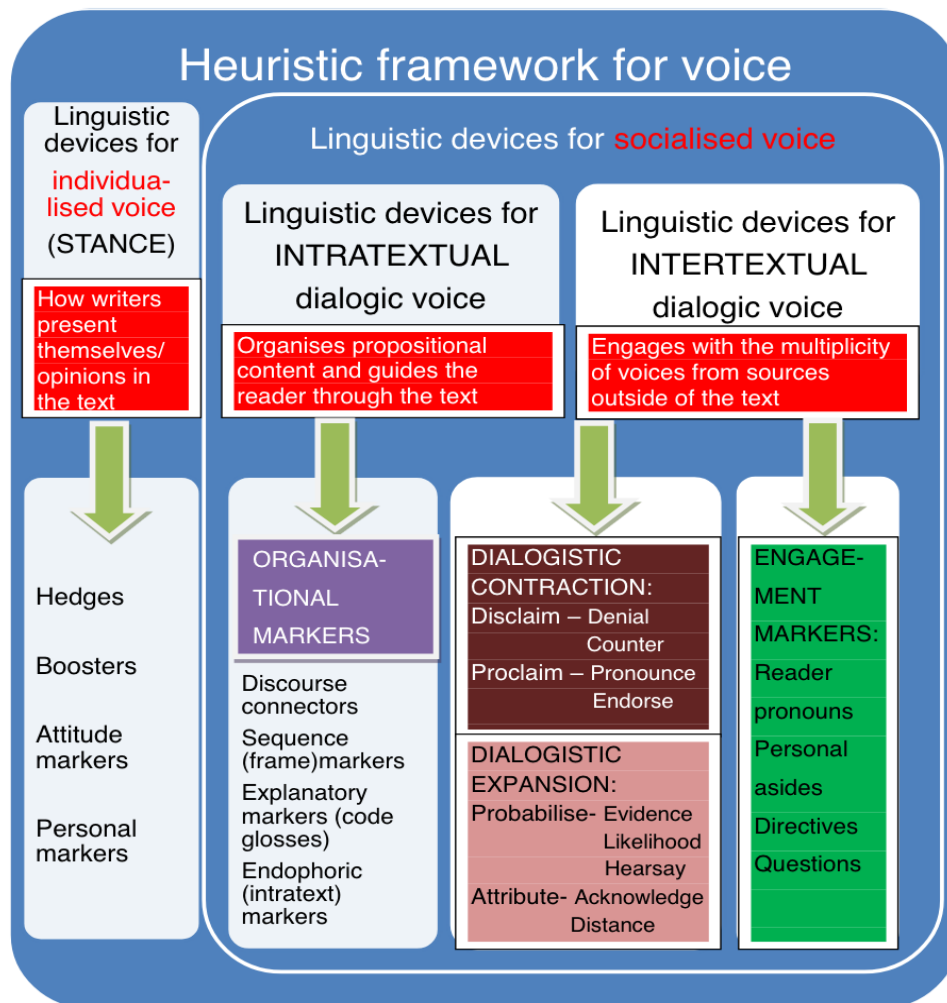
The heuristic framework for voice advocated by Olivier and Carstens (2008) amalgamates two highly influential frameworks, namely Martin and White's appraisal framework (2005) and Hyland's metadiscourse (2005). The heuristic framework diverges into two distinct categories of linguistic features: linguistic devices for individualized voice and linguistic devices for socialized voice. The framework, as depicted in Figure 1, effectively distinguishes between the linguistic devices utilized by writers to portray themselves in the text within the realm of individualized voice and the intertextual and intratextual linguistic elements constituting the domain of socialized voice. For a comprehensive understanding of the heuristic framework, you may refer to "A Heuristic Framework for Voice Instruction at the Doctoral Level" by Olivier and Carstens (2018).

Recent research in the field indicates that academic writing poses a greater challenge for L2 writers (De Magalhães et al., 2019; Guerin & Picard, 2012), given that English is not their first language (Cotterall, 2011; Morton & Storch, 2019). Indeed, research indicates that a significant number of students abandon their doctoral studies during the writing up phase (Rudd, 1985; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Torrance & Thomas, 1994).

Advanced academic writing at the doctoral level hinges on the mastery of the elements of authorial voice (Carstens & Olivier, 2018; Ahmed & Zhang, 2023). The challenge lies in facilitating the process by which L2 doctoral writers cultivate a confident authorial voice that

aligns with disciplinary conventions without succumbing to the pitfalls of plagiarism (Guerin and Picard, 2012, p. 34).

PhD Supervisors express dissatisfaction with the quality of doctoral writing produced by their supervisees (Kamler & Thomson, 2014; Rose & McClafferty, 2001). Therefore, doctoral writers require support to metamorphose into scholarly writers with the necessary competence and confidence (Cotterall, 2011, p. 414). Not only that, but providing assistance and support is crucial for the development and sustainability of advanced academic writing (Paltridge, 2003; Swales, 2004; Thomas, 2006).

To address the identified gaps in the literature, namely the difficulties doctoral students face at the writing up stage and lack of a confident authorial voice, this study examines students' awareness of the elements of authorial voice, the availability of doctoral training programs in thesis writing and academic literacy, and potential interventions preferred by PhD students in the development of a disciplinary voice.

3. Method

The methodology deployed in order to investigate advanced academic writing, or rather academic writing literacy at the doctoral level, was guided by the following questions:

1. Are doctoral students aware of the elements that constitute advanced academic writing?

2. Did students get any follow-up doctoral training in advanced academic writing?

3. If not, what are the interventions that doctoral students deem necessary to produce advanced academic writing in their doctoral thesis?

3.1. Participants

Seventeen Moroccan doctoral students (n = 17) from diverse disciplines, including natural sciences, social sciences, human sciences, and engineering in Moulay Ismail university, actively participated in this study. The number of participants attained in this study was qualitatively significant, especially that the data saturation criterion was respected. It is essential to note that the participants were volunteers who did not receive any remuneration for their involvement in this case study. Due to the lack of immediate access to doctoral students and unavailability of a large set of data, we opted for convenient sampling and the dissemination of the qualitative survey through WhatsApp groups that comprised the target population.

3.2. Data collection and Analysis

A qualitative survey was developed using Google Forms and distributed online to the participants. The survey consisted of a series of open-ended questions that were generated from Olivier's (2017) heuristic framework of authorial voice. The questions targeted the exploration of authorial voice awareness among doctoral students,

their prior academic writing training experiences and their preferred modes of intervention in receiving training. For data analysis, we carried out thematic analysis on the participants' elaborate responses in order to identify patterns and themes that provided valuable insights into the research questions.

4. Results

The thematic examination of the questions related to assessing Moroccan doctoral students' awareness of the elements of authorial voice produced the following outcomes. 15 out of 17 doctoral students demonstrated confidence in their academic writing skills, encompassing research ideas, literature reviews, research methodologies, data analysis, citation and referencing, grammar and language accuracy, revision and editing, academic integrity, and ethics.

In general, doctoral students felt adequately prepared to engage in research-related activities at the thesis production level. However, when asked about their proficiency in the components comprising desired doctoral academic writing literacy skills, the results were as follow: 8 out of 17 participants self-rated as still unable to critically analyze and construct strong arguments in their academic writing. More than 9 doctoral students expressed their lack of readiness to actively engage with and critique ideas and arguments of other scholars in their academic writing.

Regarding whether doctoral students received or will receive any training in advanced academic writing from their doctoral laboratories, implying exposure to the elements of authorial voice, we uncovered the following findings. Almost all participants (16 out of 17 students) did not receive any support in developing and constructing compelling arguments; using appropriate linguistic elements to manifest their authorial voices; addressing the reader using intertextual language; and showcasing the author through using intratextual and individual elements of voice.

Our last question pertained to the modes of interventions that doctoral students considered suitable for advancing their academic writing. The first highly sought-after means of academic writing training was proposed to be through fun and engaging workshops and seminars. This was followed by the appeal for access to academic writing software, websites, online courses, and applications that can guide them and help identify their writing deficiencies. They also requested clear one-on-one feedback from their supervisors as frequently as needed. Finally, doctoral students advocated for organizing peer-reviewing sessions by the faculty with experts and requested permission to organize writing groups gathering PhD students from various disciplines within the faculty facilities.

5. Discussion

The results paint a nuanced picture of the confidence and proficiency of doctoral students in various aspects of their academic writing. I have observed that the majority of doctoral students demonstrated

readiness and confidence in undertaking conventional research tasks. Yet, when probed about their predisposition of higher order skills such as critical analysis and argument construction, the majority of students seemed to lack and ignore the elements of authorial voice. This underscores a potential misalignment in doctoral students' expectations of their abilities and their actual competencies in the fieldwork.

This misalignment indicates a potential gap in the current doctoral educational landscape, especially given that the significance of the elements of authorial voice, which form the foundation for doctoral academic writing literacy, is widely acknowledged by scholars worldwide. Therefore, our future efforts to enhance academic writing in higher education should be strategic and should focus on incorporating the elements of authorial voice into existing training programs or developing specialized modules for doctoral students to undertake within the timeframe of their PhD completion.

The modes of interventions suggested by doctoral students, such as interactive workshops, access to software, and personalized feedback provide valuable data for designing future interventions. These preferences can be utilized to create tailored programs that are most convenient to address specific deficiencies in academic writing literacy according to students' preferences.

The interest demonstrated by doctoral students in workshops, expert-led peer-reviewing sessions, and writing groups highlights a broader cultural shift towards a new social approach to academic writing,

which is further reflected in the elements of authorial voice. The call for a supportive scholarly community that promotes collaborative learning was not only proposed by doctoral students but also supported by numerous scholars in the literature (Cotterall, 2011; Morton & Storch, 2021; Paltridge, 2003; Swales, 2004; Thomas, 2006).

6. Implications, Recommendations and Conclusions

The findings disclosed by this study bear several implications for doctoral academic writing, particularly concerning thesis composition. The substantial percentage of students who professed confidence in traditional academic areas, specifically in grammar and language accuracy related to academic writing, suggest that the existing pedagogical approach caters to the basic aspects of writing proficiency. However, the lack of exposure to advanced academic writing, including authorial voice, among the majority of participants implies a potential oversight in the current doctoral educational curriculum.

This essentially necessitates a reconsideration, if not a paradigm shift, of the content and modes of training offered within the realm of doctoral programs, with a focus on the transmission of the elements of authorial voice that cultivate confident writers with their independent authorial voices. Additionally, the participants' expressed interest in certain intervention modes over others should be taken into consideration when designing future training programs. Research into ways to incorporate students' preferences at the doctoral level can

ensure an optimal environment for Moroccan PhD students to thrive in.

In essence, the study illuminates the importance of a comprehensive approach to academic writing training for doctoral students that tackles not only foundational but advanced academic writing literacy skills while nurturing a collaborative culture within the academic community.

7. Limitations & Directions for Future Research

The study's limitations manifest in the sample size and single-institution focus, along with the limited exploration of the notion of authorial voice. Findings stem from a relatively small sample of doctoral students in Morocco. Moreover, the study centers on doctoral students' experiences within Moulay Ismail University in Meknes, prompting the need for additional case studies across different Moroccan universities to ensure generalizability. While the study touches on authorial voice elements, it refrains from nuanced investigation due to relying on self-assessment for gauging participants' writing skills.

Future research might embrace a longitudinal approach to trace students' academic writing and its evolution throughout their doctoral education. Comparative analyses of doctoral academic writing literacy skills across disciplines could be conducted through a multi-site study, offering a more holistic view of the academic writing landscape. Integrating qualitative methods in future research can deepen

understanding of authorial voice elements, drawing insights from contextual variation. Lastly, interventions aligned with doctoral students' preferences can be tested for effectiveness and developed for implementation in doctoral training programs.

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