Original Research

Academic writing as sociolinguistic practice: The case of academic writing in foreign language studies

by Evelyn Vovou

Evelyn Vovou National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece evovou@yahoo.com

Academic writing often poses considerable difficulties that have to do with the way academic writing courses are conceived and the skills students are taught within this context. Especially students in foreign language studies deal with additional difficulties that are related to their self-perception as scholars, to their somewhat limited experience within the academic environment and to expressing logical/epistemic thinking in the foreign language. The aim of the study presented in this paper is to explore the nature of academic writing as a sociolinguistic practice. Research questions are: how do (a) the lack of sociolinguistic lived experience within academia, (b) the discrepancies between first and foreign language, (c) the absence of the core skills of grammar, logic and rhetoric influence academic writing? Participants in the study attended an academic writing workshop. Data was gathered using Contextual Inquiry by means of observation grids and semi-structured interviews. Results show that (a) even high-achieving students exhibit feelings of incompetence when it comes to academic writing, (b) the material of academic writing courses should include logical/epistemic thinking tasks, based on the training of core skills, (c) achievement in academic writing correlates with a sense of scholarship, (d) a distinction between social communicative and academic communicative language might be helpful. Academic writing courses should take existential, declarative as well as linguistic knowledge into consideration. The study concludes that it is advisable to integrate logical and epistemic thinking training into academic writing courses, broadening their scope. Alternatively, introducing a separate logical and epistemic thinking course would be more advantageous. This approach is preferable because logical and epistemic thinking extends beyond writing (such as papers and theses) to encompass spoken communication (presentations) and reading (strategies for literature search and synthesis).

KEYWORDS: *academic writing, sociolinguistic practice, lived experience, second/foreign language, imposter syndrome, logical/epistemic thinking*

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a continuous topic of discussion in tertiary education worldwide, especially in humanistic studies at a university level. One could say that humanistic studies are mostly concerned with the quality of academic writing since the field of humanistic studies goes back to the source of all learning, the prerequisite of studying anything else: grammar, logic and rhetoric. Those subjects stand at the core of scholarship reflected in all academic activities, including writing. Hence, out of all other science studies in today's epistemic world, humanistic studies strive the most to foster scholarship. However, with that being said, academic writing courses in universities are often limited to teaching students how to work with different formatting and style guides and reference management software, often overlooking the need to train the logic, grammar and rhetoric skills needed for academic writing and, most importantly, to nurture a scholarly identity through the promotion of such skills.

The effects of this could prove detrimental for the academic and professional life of students, the quality of studies, the status of the humanities and, above all, the development of critical thinking. Acquiring poor academic writing skills acquiring only technical knowledge surrounding academic writing but not being immersed in the foundations of language and language use, namely grammar, logic and rhetoric, leads undergraduates to experience imposter syndrome, which is observed very frequently in academia among students (Thompson et al., 1998; Parkman, 2016; Breeze, 2018; Denese, 2020). In fact, the feeling of incompetence among students that demonstrated above-average knowledge in their (humanities-based) field of study that arose when they engaged with academic writing, gave the author the incentive to research academic writing as a sociolinguistic practice and part of a habitus of scholarship, a way of projecting oneself to gain respect of social and professional colleagues. Imposter syndrome may follow undergraduates in their professional life

or hinder them from pursuing a master's degree, etc. On a collective level imposter syndrome among students and graduates could reflect poorly on the quality of studies. Feelings of incompetence and of poor critical thinking that reach the rest of society in one way or another (e.g., through low professional self-esteem) lead to a lower face validity for the respective university departments. This in turn inevitably damages the status of studies, especially in humanistic fields that in this day and age are on the verge of being regarded as irrelevant. Apart from the above, an even greater risk may exist: a loss of the sense of scholarship among students and graduates paired together with the rise of AI in academia may prove to be a blow to critical thinking and a gateway for fake news, flawed data, violations of ethics, etc.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study presented here was conducted on the basis of qualitative methods in order to gain appropriate insight into the experience of undergraduate students regarding academic writing as a sociolinguistic practice, the skills – or rather competences in the field of applied linguistics – needed for academic writing and the role of scholarship as part of their identity. The focus group consisted of 36 graduate students, female and male, enrolled in the Department of German Language and Literature at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. The parameter that characterises the focus group is that all of their academic activities, including writing, is conducted in German, with German being a foreign language for most (n=32) and Greek being their first language (henceforth L1). A small percentage is bilingual in German and Greek, meaning that those students have a parent who is German, have grown up with that parent and are immersed in the German language, but live in Greece.

The focus group took part in an academic writing workshop (summer semesters 2022 and 2023) that aimed at fostering a scholarly identity. The academic writing workshop (Schreibretreat) was offered to students as complementary to their studies and is not part of the curriculum. Participants worked mostly individually on their individual papers and thesis but did so in a collective environment in order to foster scholarship and for them to view collective progress as part of academia. Participants were invited to work on their individual thesis but as a collective, so that they could have a shared experience, recognise the detrimental effects of imposter syndrome in the other person and thus develop a more lenient self-image regarding feelings of incompetence in academic writing as well as recognising that the processes involved in academic writing (e.g., hypothesising, logical reasoning, concluding, etc.) are closely connected to grammar, logic and rhetoric that in turn are translated into competences to be developed, of greater importance than drafting and editing.

The majority of participants (n=34) took the time available in the workshop to write about their thesis as well as participate in timed discussions about the difficulties and joys of academic writing, their participation and self-image within academia, the importance of scholarship for their further development, their feelings of incompetence regarding academic writing, etc. Data was gathered using Contextual Inquiry (Lazaraton, 2003; Bradley & Harvey, 2019) by means of observation grids and semi-structured interviews. A rationale of Grounded Theory (Hadley, 2017) was implemented, although a bigger and more longitudinal data set would be sufficient to safely theorise about regarding academic writing as sociolinguistic practice.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
3.1. Academic writing as sociolinguistic practice

Academic writing has its place as a subject in preparatory courses included in most university curricula and a passing grade is often a prerequisite for advanced courses, as is the case for the focus group. As discussed above, academic writing as a course – and not as much as the subject of (student companion) books of independent publishers – is often strongly focused on drafting (structuring a paper and/or thesis in an institutionally acceptable way, e.g., including the distinctive features of each university, the declaration of originality, placing the chapters in a correct order) and editing (formatting of references, etc.) (Dorfman & Kalugin, 2023). Logical and epistemic reasoning through mastering the properties of language and language use is often considered a given that is acquired before students enter tertiary education. In the context of this study, where participants are required to write their papers/thesis in a foreign language, this could mean that logical and epistemic reasoning through languaging (Becker, 1991 as cited in Jaworski, 2012) are filtered and restructured to accommodate the properties of another linguistic system that, in itself, creates a different context of usage.

In terms of the context of usage, writing in general was first approached from a sociolinguistic perspective by a pioneer in the field, Jan Blommaert. Blommaert (2013) identifies *'specific sets of resources that are required for writing: from infrastructural ones, over graphic ones, linguistic, semantic, pragmatic and metapragmatic ones, to social and cultural ones. [...] Thus, we can arrive at vastly more precise diagnostic analyses of 'problems' in writing, and this has a range of important effects'* (Blommaert, 2013, p. 441). Blommaert's (2013) suggestion to clarify possible issues regarding the nature of writing as a sociolinguistic object of inquiry also applies to the issues discussed in this paper. Issues in academic writing should be addressed considering the environment they arise in. In this paper it is argued that academic writing possesses in itself symbolic power (Kramsch, 2011, 2020). As far as infrastructure is concerned, academic writing serves – as all courses do – the purposes of assessment, of distinguishing between students that master it fully, at an average level or poorly. Students that master it at an average to level or fully can move on to a master's degree and a PhD. But precisely because academic writing serves as a vehicle for all other courses, the proof of knowledge of the next subject is dependent on the mastery of academic writing. This means that academic writing, or more precisely academic written language, has a greater symbolic value, since it influences how knowledge of other subjects

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is being transferred. That is understood by universities, especially outside the field of humanistic studies. In this case, universities and departments choose to evaluate the knowledge of students using other forms of assessment, such as multiple-choice tests, etc. When this is applied to humanistic studies, it creates a sense of hurried and sometimes sloppy evaluation; a sense of evaluation for the sake of evaluation and not a sense of fostering scholarly identities. While other science studies can afford to produce graduates that will be of market value in the sense that they will have specific knowledge that applies to specific professional tasks, the humanities need to also produce critical thinkers and leaders of social change which is only possible through acquiring grammar, logic and rhetoric. The washback of academic writing is therefore obvious on a social micro-, meso- and macro-level.

In the focus group researched in the study, cultural and linguistic sets of resources (Blommaert, 2013) are present in the academic writing endeavours of the participants. As mentioned above, the focus group comprises of students whose first language is Greek and foreign language is German. All courses offered to them by the Department, including academic writing, are taught and evaluated in German. Linguistic discrepancies between the two language systems as well as semantic ones could create problems regarding academic writing in a foreign language, and not only in relation to quality but also in relation to the attitudes of students towards academic writing, as will be discussed further, and to all other language-based aspects of this and other study programmes such as the curriculum, the content of the academic writing course and the related material, the preferred level of linguistic knowledge upon entering foreign language departments, etc. Regarding macropragmatic (Cap, 2010) and metapragmatic resources discrepancies are not as likely to arise, since the genre (academic papers, thesis, etc.) is more or less universal in the European state of affairs concerning university education: that is, there is a spoken and unspoken consensus between European universities – as well as US tertiary institutions – regarding the acceptable style of the language used in this genre. This could also influence the micropragmatics (Cap, 2010) of the genre, but on this level some discrepancies could arise between different languages, and more specifically German and Greek, and between users of these languages (Βηδενμάιερ & Βώβου, 2022). Micropragmatic discrepancies in academic writing, in the context of foreign language departments, often

lead to problems which are sociocultural in nature: Greek students whose academic writing in German is negatively influenced by these discrepancies are considered of lower status than their German (e.g., Erasmus students) bilingual peers.

Considering all the above perspectives leads us to view academic writing as a sociolinguistic practice laden with symbolic power and to ponder about the changes needing to be made regarding (a) the content of academic writing courses and their reconnection with the skills that promote critical thinking (grammar, logic, rhetoric), and (b) the implications regarding academic writing in foreign language departments where students have to apply those critical thinking skills in a foreign language as effectively as they would in their L1 in order to be considered competent scholars.

3.2. Academic writing as lived experience

Having discussed the hiatus between the three core skills of epistemic thinking and the way academic writing is often taught and used in today's universities as well as having discussed academic writing as a sociolinguistic practice, it is fairly obvious that academic writing as a competence, that is trained and evaluated, and as a practice is a far more complex construct with a certain washback effect on individuals, groups and institutions. One hypothesis that calls for closer examination in the context of this study is whether academic writing is, as it should be, based on grammar, logic and rhetoric and that an expression of critical thinking can indeed be taught and trained in today's universities and education markets. And if so, how does the institutional environment influence the outcome of its teaching and training?

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) notion of habitus, first and foremost individual habitus, we can reframe academic writing, before arguing if it can be taught/trained or not, as lived experience. Cultural capital is for Bourdieu (2016) *'the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, [...] credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class'* (Bourdieu, 2016, p. 199), while habitus is the embodiment of cultural capital. Students acquire (or not) the specific language skills needed for academic writing, namely grammar, logic and rhetoric, because they belong to a particular social class. Not many decades ago, the people entering humanistic studies in Greece either belonged to the upper class or to a lower class both cherishing the notion of scholarship. They entered the humanities either to retain or gain social respect through building scholarship and through presenting their identity as a scholar in such a way in order to be respected. In short, a scholarly identity granted them respect and their knowledge of grammar, logic and rhetoric granted them respect. Whether or not that respect would be translated into money was subject to many different parameters not discussed here. With that being said, the opposite is often observed today: since academic writing is (for humanities students) primarily a product of drafting and editing and not a product of critical, epistemic thinking, humanistic studies are seen as obsolete and holders of degrees in humanities lack societal respect. Humanities degrees do not symbolise the authority

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they used to and one reason for this could be that they are no longer tied to the notion of scholarship and students are not accepted as having the experience of scholarship with a humanities degree (Stroh & Dayneko, 2023).

Furthermore, when academic writing courses are limited to drafting and editing, as thoroughly discussed above, they don't provide their students with the opportunity to experience those core skills and to experience scholarship. *'In qualitative phenomenological research lived experience refers to the first-hand involvement or direct experiences and choices of a given person, and the knowledge they gain from it'* (Given, 2008, p. 336). The institutional habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), the habitus of a given university or the habitus of humanities, etc. limits the students' experience of scholarships and thus limits them and contributes to imposter syndrome.

When it comes to academic writing in a foreign language, the matter is even more complex. Students in foreign language departments often socialise in the foreign language only in the context of their studies and not in everyday life. This means, they have first-hand involvement in specific sociolinguistic events (lectures, seminars, communication with professors) only in the context and the (physical, virtual, etc.) environment of their studies. So, why don't they experience academic writing in the foreign language as part of scholarship and often suffer from imposter syndrome? One explanation could be that logical reasoning, where epistemic reasoning is rooted, is acquired in the L1 (until a certain age) and transferring that knowledge in the foreign language effectively or not has to do with semantic frames (Fillmore, 1982, 1985), which, in turn, is connected to *lived experience*, since *semantic* knowledge is experience-based (Yee, 2017). Such a hypothesis would need a more detailed cognitive linguistics-based analysis. Another explanation, that many Greek colleagues find related, could be that the pedagogical paradigm in tertiary education has changed in the last decades and logical reasoning and critical thinking are not available to students as teaching subjects anymore, not even in their L1. If this is the case, the results presented in Βηδενμάιερ and Βώβου (2022) that structures in the foreign language are acquired to the same degree as structures in the L1, could also apply here. If complex cognitive and linguistic structures applied in logical/epistemic reasoning are not (fully) acquired in the L1 (e.g., the pupil did not attend higher levels of secondary education), then the same structures in the foreign language will not be acquired as well. Again, further analysis is needed to support this hypothesis.

3.3. Foreign language competences in academic writing

Exploring academic writing in a foreign language from a sociolinguistic perspective means that the aspect of competence in the foreign language should be included in the discussion. Although the subject of academic writing, and the respective university courses, do not include the teaching and assessing of the linguistic competences involved, writing is considered a medium of language production. Since this study focuses on researching academic writing in a foreign language, one should first look into the communicative competences, as categorised in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001, 2018), that need to be present in this medium of language production.

Although not much is to be found in the literature regarding the calibration of CEFR-descriptors to academic language and a lot less about academic writing (e.g., Lowie et al., 2010; Shaarawy & Lotfy, 2012; Haines et al., 2013; Lachout & Dominiková, 2014), one can assume that, as the CEFR itself states, descriptors presented are only to be seen as guidelines and that interested parties should apply descriptors according to the context that interests them. Hence, most of the studies that exist are case studies. Long before the CEFR, Cummins (1983) proposed a model of second language acquisition, where he made the distinction between social communicative language and academic communicative language. The distinction was made based on the fact that *'academic communicative competence is acquired through the exposure of academic setting and requires higher order of thinking [...], a learner takes 5-7 years to be proficient in academic communicative language. Therefore, those who speak English fluently in social interactions are not necessarily proficient in academic language'* (Cummins, 1983 as cited in Alqahtani, 2022, p. 2). Cummins (1983) bases his observation more on cognition and less on language, he then proposed that a learner can indeed become proficient in academic language (in 5-7 years when in the appropriate setting). Although no direct connection is being made, the hypothesis stated in this paper is the most plausible: higher order cognition is trained through language and through the teaching of the aforementioned core skills.

The question remains though: since higher order cognition, or, to be more precise, logical/epistemic thinking is acquired through grammar, logic and rhetoric, do we teach those core language skills in foreign language academic writing courses? In a word, yes. But, looking to find direct correlations between the skills of grammar, logic and rhetoric and the communicative competences presented in the CEFR (2001, 2018) should not be the goal. Grammar, logic and rhetoric are included in the *savoir* (CEFR, 2001), that is, in *declarative knowledge* resulting from experience and from formal learning. *'Academic knowledge in a scientific [...] educational field [...] clearly has an important part to play in the reception and understanding of texts in a foreign language relating to those fields'* (CEFR, 2001, p. 11). Academic writing courses should focus on training the intricacies of language, in this case the foreign language, and the way to make logical connections, such as between statement − explanation − example −

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conclusion, based on the already acquired level of proficiency in the foreign language. The fact that to train core skills in a foreign language a student must already be proficient at a higher level (C1 & C2) is undeniable. This is also suggested by the CEFR (2001, 2018), since descriptors that have to do with complex linguistic tasks are above C1-level, for example, *'Breaking down complicated information can make a complex issue more comprehensible by building up the chain of steps or line of argument, and by recapitulating key points'* (CEFR, 2018, p. 263).

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

As discussed above, the data for this study was gathered using observation grids and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were often followed by open-end discussions, only with those participants that took it upon themselves to further discuss individual considerations regarding academic writing. Because open-end discussions were not part of the research design, the data they provided was only used complementarily.

The first conclusion that can be drawn is, as discussed above, the feeling of incompetence regarding academic writing as well as academic writing in a foreign language. As far as academic writing per se is concerned, the vast majority of participants (bilinguals and participants with German as a foreign language) reported that they faced problems regarding the synthesis of academic texts. More specifically, they reported that they were *baffled, and were anxious about it*, they *didn't know how to do it*, and that they were *not taught, no one guided* them to do it. When asked how well they performed on average in the papers or theses they had already handed to the professors for evaluation, their answers varied from 6 to 10, with 10 being excellent. This means, that even students that performed well thought of themselves as incompetent at academic writing.

It can hence be concluded that imposter syndrome was present among the participants. When asked if the preparatory academic writing course that they were obliged to attend in their first year and is a prerequisite for studying further was helpful in providing them with the necessary knowledge regarding the synthesis of academic texts, the vast majority of respondents answered that the course was *somewhat helpful* but they *don't remember a thing*, meaning that the course took place, based on the curriculum, at the beginning of their studies and that the knowledge acquired was forgotten when they got to the third year and had to write papers. One can conclude that more consistent

training, for example, not only one academic writing course taking place in one semester, but courses in every semester up until the third year, could be beneficial and would solve a part of the problem.

Regarding the material of the course, most participants said that they *learned how to write citations and references*. This proves the hypothesis that academic writing courses are often limited to teaching the formalities of today's academic writing (formatting, style guides and reference management software) and not the logic of language behind the formalities.

Concerning academic writing in a foreign language and the difficulties that arise from their level of proficiency, the answers of the participants were inconclusive. All bilingual participants (n=4) think that they possess a high level of proficiency in German (C1-C2), but they all reported difficulties and feelings of incompetence in academic writing, although the latter was not as high as in participants with German as a foreign language. Participants with German as a foreign language (n=32) also reported difficulties regarding the influence of their competence level on their academic writing, and the majority (n=28) also stated that language courses were *not as helpful when it comes to academic writing*. This could point to a preliminary proof that Cummins' (1983) dichotomy between social communicative language and academic communicative language is still valid, but data from a larger number of participants would be needed to back up his argument in practice and propose a change of material accordingly. (Students in the Department are obliged to take language courses at C-level in the first two years of their studies. The courses are considered a prerequisite for continuing to the third year. Language courses are not limited to writing tasks, they include all kinds of production, reception and mediation as described in the CEFR. The content of the material used (texts, etc.) often has to do with current issues in society, education, science, etc.)

As far as their view of scholarship was concerned and whether this trait was part their identity, the majority of participants (n=29) reported that they *don't view themselves as scholars*. The rest of the participants (n=7) replied that they *could view themselves as scholars, perhaps in the future when they work as professionals*. These answers could mean that (a) imposter syndrome regarding academic writing influences their self-view regarding scholarship, (b) because the humanities have lost a degree of face value in today's educational market, students have lost the sense of scholarship, (c) because their academic formal knowledge neglected the teaching and training in core skills, a sense of scholarship has not been formed, (d) their academic environment does not give such an input. Scholarship is perhaps taken for granted and is not discussed and cherished or professors are limited to teaching and providing feedback on their respective subjects and not encouraging scholarship in general.

Although the following feedback came from only one participant, it is worth mentioning for future reference and research. In the open-ended discussion after the interview, one

of the bilingual participants expressed the feeling that she was *reluctant* and *having* (language) *difficulties* writing her thesis *in German to the same degree as in Greek*. This could be one more indication of the hypothesis addressed in Βηδενμάιερ and Βώβου (2022), namely that if complex cognitive and linguistic structures applied in logical/epistemic reasoning are not acquired in the L1, then the same structures won't be present in the foreign language.

5. CONCUSION

In conclusion, core skills should be reintroduced in all science studies, not just in the humanities. A lower than C-level foreign language proficiency does not seem to hinder the teaching and training of core skills and logical/epistemic thinking, as long as both take place. Students and later professionals with a lingering feeling of incompetence could be detrimental to the evolution of science and society. *Knowing thyself*, or, as also described in the CEFR, *existential knowledge* is, together with *savoir*, the knowledge of the core skills discussed in this paper, is essential for acquiring any knowledge, such as a foreign language. In order to allow someone to be a scholar, not just hold a degree for the job market, universities and especially humanistic studies must support *existential knowledge* by forming identities as well as *declarative knowledge* by training logical/epistemic thinking.

In order to do so, a change of stance as well as a change in curricula and material should be considered. It is more than reasonable that academic writing courses are a prerequisite, but departments should consider either a change in description and material of academic writing courses, so that they include the training of logical/epistemic thinking, or the introduction of a logical/epistemic thinking course as a subject independent of academic writing. The later would be more favourable, since logical/epistemic thinking is not only applied in writing (papers, theses,

etc.), but also in speaking and mediating (oral presentations) and reading (strategies for literature search and synthesis).

As far as departments of foreign languages are concerned, language courses should touch upon the material of academic writing courses. In practice, language courses could implement a number of tasks per semester or per course that apply logical/epistemic thinking. Social communicative language should remain the main teaching and learning goal of university language courses but tasks that train academic communicative language should be included.

Also, an important point to stress is the value of precise and, in cases, thorough feedback regarding academic writing. Due to an immense workload, it is often the case that academic writing tasks, such as short papers, oral presentations, etc. are not given enough feedback as far as the internal epistemic logic of a text is concerned. Feedback is always provided for subject-related content but academic language, as it is often limitingly described, has not always been commented upon.

Lastly, universities need to apply creative ideas in order to foster the sense of scholarship, such as the collective academic writing workshop presented here. For example, the Three Minute Thesis Competition (3MT®) by the University of Queensland, collective and collaborative working with literature in the Department's library, peer feedback, colloquia that are specific for academic writing and logical/epistemic reasoning, etc. are important ways forward.

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