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1. Individuality and Commonality in Thesis Writing: Strategies and Classroom Activities[1]

1.1. Introduction

The pervasive influence of English across cultural and linguistic boundaries has significantly impacted research and higher education, fostering the widespread use of this language in academic communication. The global nature of academic activities, publications, and research underscores the increasing significance of English in the international academic landscape, prompting changes in the study and teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This change also permeates English-medium domains of discourse. Intercultural perspectives concerning research writing (e.g. Mur-Dueñas & Šinkūnienė, 2018) often focus on language variation in native and non-native writing; similarly, recent work on research publication purposes delves into the interplay between authors' native languages and the international publication system, exploring how researchers develop genre awareness within their disciplinary fields (cf. Flowerdew & Habibie, 2022). The dominance of English in research has led to perceived discrimination between native and non-native speakers (Lillis & Curry, 2010; Ferguson et al., 2011), although debates over English

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in academic contexts also acknowledge that academic writing is not acquired through natural language acquisition, but through formal education. Specific features of language varieties, such as technical taxonomies, lexical density, rhetorical structures, and grammatical patterns, require learning by both native and non-native speakers (Römer, 2009; Tribble, 2017). The use of appropriate forms and rhetorical structures in specific academic contexts demands effort from speakers in their mother tongue and additional languages, leading to a continual reshaping of communication structures.

The increasing use of English in many professional and academic contexts has played a pivotal role not only in expanding the teaching of English at universities worldwide but also in determining the growth of teaching in English. English Medium Instruction (EMI) in higher education programmes exposes students to English not only during classes but also in exam preparation, presentations, essays, and final dissertations. This trend creates complex language contact situations similar to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Mauranen, 2018), implying a heightened focus on the local organisation, topic negotiation, and careful use of metadiscourse, aiming for communicative efficiency, clarity, and explicitness (Mauranen, 2012, 2023; Wu *et al*., 2020). The rising popularity of programmes taught in English also draws renewed attention to EAP in many different contexts. Students are required to extend their skills to a wider range of situations of use. Research has focused mostly on the specificity of different contexts (cf. Griffin, 2023) and the impact in terms of classroom interaction and lecturing styles (e.g. Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2023). Attention to forms of writing is more recent in this perspective, but it is certainly becoming more and more relevant at higher education institutions worldwide.

An area that certainly needs to be studied further is that of MA/MSc and PhD thesis writing. Dissertations can help trace important stages in the development of academic literacy through the formative years when students develop their identity as academic writers (cf. Paré *et al*., 2011). Studying the rhetorical and linguistic features of dissertations can help understand learners' needs as well as variation across disciplines or between first and additional languages. Genre analysis has contributed greatly to describing different aspects of thesis writing. Ever since the early developments of the approach, thesis writing has been studied in its complexity, including textual organisation (e.g. Swales, 1990, 2004; Dudley-Evans, 1999; Paltridge, 2002; Bunton, 2002, 2005), specific language features (Shaw, 1992), citation practices (Thompson, 2001, 2005), or specific sections such as introductions (Samraj, 2008; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b), literature reviews (Kwan, 2006; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014a), discussion sections (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015b), method chapters (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015a), conclusions (Hewings, 1993), and acknowledgements (Hyland, 2004;

Zhang, 2012). Attention has also been paid to the evolution of the genre (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020) and its variation and hybridity in certain areas of the humanities (Starfield & Ravelli, 2006; Ravelli *et al*., 2014; Paltridge & Starfield, 2023). At the same time, attention has constantly been paid to the learning process, providing textbooks and course materials for teaching the structure of the thesis (e.g. Swales & Feak, 2012; Paltridge & Starfield, 2019), and discussing different ways of supporting learners in their writing (Dong, 1998; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011; Reynolds & Thompson, 2011; Yu, 2021). If early studies focused largely on PhD theses, more recently greater attention is being paid to the thesis writing needs of EMI learners at MA level (Adamson *et al*., 2019; Mendoza *et al*., 2023).

In this perspective, it may be worth investigating how EAP teaching is shaped by local and global linguistic forces, starting from the distinctiveness of the sociolinguistic contexts in which English is studied and the functional ranges and domains in which it is used. We therefore set out to discuss our experience of designing an introduction to thesis writing for Italian university students attending an English-medium MA in Languages for Communication in International Enterprises and Organisations. The programme is multidisciplinary, and the final dissertation must be written in English regardless of the subject studied, ranging from language sciences to economics and legal studies.

The chapter starts with a discussion of the tension between individuality – expressing an individual point of view – and commonality – adopting the rhetorical and linguistic choices of the specific discourse community addressed. The need to strike the right balance between the two is an issue that the authors feel to be central in the learning of academic writing skills for Italian university students. The sections that follow introduce and discuss the course context, the pedagogical rationale, and an analysis of activities meant to teach the students how to engage with the discourse community of their choice and to express their stance in reviewing the literature. The chapter closes with brief concluding remarks.

1.2. Background: Genre and Voice between Individuality and Commonality

The tension between individuality and commonality has been examined extensively in the literature (e.g. Gotti, 2009; Hyland, 2010; Flowerdew & Wang, 2015). From the point of view of EAP teaching, the key issue seems to be guiding the students to establish their own individual position through cognizance of the expected rhetorical patterns and the common linguistic choices in the discourse community. On the one hand, it is necessary to be aware of

the conventions of the discourse community and the standard organisation of dissertations; on the other, it is important to make sure students learn to position themselves.

The first aim should be to guide students towards an inductive and critical understanding of the principles that define a discourse community (Swales, 1990), connecting this understanding to the epistemology of their discipline and emphasising how it influences discursive practices. Echoing Bhatia's (1993) fundamental question: "Why do members of specialist discourse communities employ the language they do?", particular attention should be given to the idea that the differences between discourse communities extend far beyond the use of specialised language and topics (often the first aspects highlighted by students). It should also be kept in mind that, despite its groundbreaking contributions to the field, the concept of "discourse community" as originally delineated by Swales (1990) has not been without criticism for assuming an overly harmonious view (e.g. Mauranen, 1993, p. 14). To be fair, however, Swales's initial conceptualisation never depicted the concept of a discourse community as a uniform, unchanging, self-contained system that resists any evolution or ignores a heteroglossia of voices within its identity traits. This theme was revisited by Swales himself when he expressed his "dismay at the inertia" surrounding the concept he had introduced nearly three decades earlier (Swales, 2016, p. 3), thus acknowledging the need for continual reassessment in light of changing times.

When focusing on the notion of genre (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993) in the context of materials development, it is essential to consider the multidimensional nature of genre knowledge. Drawing upon Tardy's (2009) foundational work, genre knowledge can be seen to unfold across four interrelated domains – formal, rhetorical, process, and subject-matter knowledge. These domains do not exist in isolation; rather, they interact and consolidate as learners progress in their understanding and application of each of them. Ultimately, this journey leads to a transition from initial familiarity with genre concepts to achieving a state of fluency and expertise. The formal attributes of a genre adhere to its conventional structure but also provide a scaffold for students to express their individual insights and research aims. Students can appropriate a genre's recognisable form, content, and language use to convey their unique perspectives while maintaining commonality with established academic norms. In this fine balance, rhetorical knowledge empowers students to grasp the communicative intent and persuasive strategies inherent to different genres. Expertise in the subject matter is essential for students to challenge, expand, and make meaningful contributions to their field of study. However, for their input to be appreciated and taken seriously, they need to communicate it clearly so that their academic work is noticed and recognised.

Bridging these elements, process knowledge relates to the cognitive and compositional activities that underlie genre execution, including the ability to engage abstractly with concepts, construct texts, and navigate the expectations of different genre communities. Previous studies have consistently shown that while learners can develop formal knowledge at the declarative level (Starfield, 2003; Tardy, 2006), the acquisition and application of rhetorical and process knowledge are more complex, influenced by their academic background, goals, and disciplinary engagement (Kuteeva, 2013; Paltridge *et al.*, 2012; Thompson, 2013). This body of research situates the present study at a critical juncture, specifically focusing on translating theoretical underpinnings of genre knowledge (Tardy, 2009) into concrete writing practices for MA students.

In this context, nurturing metacognition, or 'thinking about thinking' (see Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011), becomes a pivotal element in EAP genre-focused instruction, especially aimed at preparing early-stage research students for their future thesis-writing endeavours. This metacognitive approach involves guiding students beyond the realm of *knowledge telling* – merely knowing what thesis writing conventions are – to *knowledge transforming* (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987).[2] In this more advanced stage, students move past rote learning to understand how writing conventions can be effectively substantiated and why they are important, leading to a more sophisticated, analytical, and epistemically guided approach in their writing. In this dynamic process, students are increasingly frequently asked to reflect critically on the thesis writing process, continuously adapting and refining their approach, ensuring it resonates with both their personal academic voice and the expectations of their scholarly audience.

Another area where the interplay between commonality and individuality is clearly manifest is that of academic voice. The concept of voice, often discussed in relation to that of stance, has received extensive attention since Matsuda's (2001) claims that it serves a paramount function in academic writing and in constructing author identity. According to Matsuda's (2001) definition, voice can be described as "the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-changing repertoires" (p. 40). In other words, authors construct their persona in discourse not only through linguistic and

2 The term *knowledge telling* refers to the initial stage of writing development where writers focus on recounting information or knowledge as they know it, often adhering strictly to memorised structures or content without significant analysis or synthesis. This contrasts with *knowledge transforming*, a more advanced stage where writers actively re-shape and re-interpret their knowledge to meet specific rhetorical purposes, thereby creating new insights. This shift is crucial in thesis composition, as it requires the writer to not only present known information but to critically engage with it, offering new perspectives and contributing to the scholarly conversation.