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# Multilingualism and Academic Writing: A Match Made in Heaven or a Disastrous Combination?

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## **Keywords**

multilingualism; academic writing; research; international students; postgraduate students

## MULTILINGUALISM AND ACADEMIC WRITING: A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN OR A DISASTROUS COMBINATION?

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### Abstract



There has long been a tradition of international students studying in the United Kingdom. Despite a dip in the most recently published statistics, Indian students continue to make up a high proportion of UK's international student population. The majority of Indian students are multilingual and this raises potential problems for them with regards to academic writing, such as grammar, structuring, and vocabulary. This article presents a largely empirical study which examines the experiences of, and issues faced by seven postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment at Birmingham City University. Samples of academic writing of each participant were analysed and semi structured interviews were also conducted with the participants. Lessons from these experiences, such as the difference between participants' actual and perceived academic writing ability, and the tendency of some students to think in their native language and then translate their thoughts into English, are discussed and proposals made as to how multilingual students can be better supported in their academic writing within the Faculty.

### Introduction

Until the most recent statistics were published, the United Kingdom (UK) had seen year on year increases in the number of international students studying in the UK for almost thirty years. Globalization, greater freedom of movement and ever expanding middle classes in many African and Asian countries brought more and more students to UK Higher Education Institutions. In 2011-2012 there were 435, 230 non-UK students studying in the UK. This was an increase from 318,395 in 2004-2005. The increasingly international nature of higher education is not unique to the UK. There are currently a record number of international students in the USA and growing numbers in Scandinavia, the Middle East and the Far East (Ryan 2013).

With nearly 7,000 languages worldwide, multilingualism is a very common phenomenon (Lewis 2009, cited in Cenoz 2013). There are numerous definitions for multilingualism, for example, Li (2008) defines a multilingual person as "anyone who can communicate in more than one language, be it active (through speaking and writing) or passive (through listening and reading)", while the European Commission (2007) define multilingualism as "...the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives" (Cenoz 2013: 5).

Multilingualism has many advantages and is a great skill to have. Rothman and Treffers-Daller (2013) argue that multilingualism increases employability and that there are "cognitive advantages", as multilingual persons need to be mentally more flexible in order to continually switch between languages on a regular basis. Multilingualism is particularly common, but not confined to, Africa, Asia and South America. However, despite the benefits of multilingualism there can also be negative effects, such as a tendency to overlook their native language abilities and competencies.

Nzekwe-Excel (2014) defines academic writing as:

"...a formal writing style that conforms to a set of conventions in presenting ideas and viewpoints on a particular topic. It goes beyond adequate academic referencing or the use of

evidence; thus it also involves analytical /critical thinking, objectivity, and appropriate presentation (style, grammar, layout and structure)”.

It is clear from the definitions of academic writing is radically different from other forms of writing, such as industrial report writing, descriptive writing, and narrative writing. The acquiring of academic writing skills and the mastery of academic writing is something which is vital to academics. Without the mastery of academic writing, a postgraduate research student may struggle to convey their research and associated findings to the relevant audience, and will fail to translate their work into academic papers.

This paper seeks to explore how the multilingualism of Indian Postgraduate Research (PGR) students based in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment (CEBE) at Birmingham City University (BCU) affects their academic writing. Birmingham City University (BCU) states proudly on its website that it has ‘international alliances’ and ‘an expanding student community from more than 80 countries’ (Birmingham City University, 2013). In the Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment (CEBE), 64% of the full-time postgraduate research students are classified as international students. (Birmingham City University, 2014). Indian students also make up a significant number of the students on postgraduate who are taught research courses at BCU (BCU 2013). Nationally, despite a recent drop, India remains the country which sends the second highest number of international students to the UK after China (UKCISA 2014).

### **Research Context**

Language is referred to as one of the important tools of globalization which, therefore, makes the English language in higher education a key commodity of globalization, as universities now compete at a global level (Doiz, et al. 2013). In this context, Wilkinson (2004) argues that this has led members of academic staff, management personnel, and university students to believe that if they are to succeed in the present global scenario that demands an international career, English is the language they need. Higher Education Institutions in the UK are more attuned to international dimensions of their profiles, suggests Balfour (2007) who notes that as in many developed nations, higher education has become an industry and export. The author further stated that globalization

The majority of world’s population is multilingual and nearly two-thirds of children globally are brought up in bilingual environments and the according to the British Academy report (2012), 39% of UK citizens can participate in a conversation with others outside their native tongue. Comprehensive data on UK multilingualism has only emerged recently and the majority of fine level data for multilingualism in the UK only exists for the school population (British Academy Report, 2012). Very limited research has been done to understand how multilingualism affects higher education in a postgraduate research context. Previous studies on the effect of modern language learning in a multilingual context on research fields like humanities and social sciences disciplines have been done (Language Matters Report, 2009) and more recently Language Matters Report (2011) revealed that lack of language skills, limited researchers in their ability to engage internationally or with their research, and also limits career opportunities for international scholarships.

This paper investigates multilingual, Indian postgraduate research students’ experiences of academic writing. The two research questions investigated as part of this study were 1) how students’ multilingual background affected their academic writing in a research context and 2) how multilingualism defined their identify at the University. Qualitative data were collected during interviews. The seven Indian research students were selected for the study, on the basis that they were enrolled in a research degree program in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Environment and that they had completed the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Skills. All participants originated from India, a country home of over 1635 languages, but with only 22 officially recognized languages and 43

languages nationally used as an instructional medium (Bhattacharya 2013). The students were interviewed to discover the languages they could read, write and/or speak apart from English, awareness of academic writing in different levels of their studies, and their experiences of academic writing in English prior to research and during their research career, most specifically while studying the University's Postgraduate Certificate (PG Cert) course in Research Skills. They were also asked about the support services they availed at the University to manage academic writing and finally how they felt being multilingual affected their academic/institutional identity.

### **Methodology**

The main aim for this study was to identify the contributions of students' multilingual identity and how it affected their academic writing in research contexts at the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment (CEBE) at Birmingham City University (BCU). The correlational study followed an empirical route, by comparing the participants' International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and PG Cert. scores, and by analysing participants' written academic work, to gain in-depth knowledge about the participants' multilingualism and how it affected their academic writing abilities. The participants, at various stages of their PhDs in CEBE, were from different states in India with varying proficiency of English. They were contacted personally to participate in the study and all responded positively by agreeing to take part in the research. The research methods used included face to face interviews and sample provision by emails.

Participants were interviewed about their multilingualism and were asked to provide samples of their academic writing mostly in the form of PG Cert. in Research Skills assignments or reviews done during their research studies. The written samples were used to review the participants' usage of language in academic research contexts. The samples were analysed for evidence of critical review and grammar. The text was scrutinised to check whether the participants followed any perceived norms of formal academic writing including a formal structure with introduction, usage of formal vocabulary, references and citations. The samples were also examined by the authors for any signs of conversational English instead of academic writing and any particular phrases which the participants used continuously throughout their writing. The written work was also analysed against the requirements of the PG Cert. in Research Skills course, to verify whether they demonstrated the nature of academic research and whether they identified the state of knowledge, in relation to their specific research topic. Finally, participants were invited for follow up discussions in which the writing samples and findings were discussed with them. Participants' interview responses and writing samples are presented without any correction to spelling, grammar or vocabulary in this paper. Consent was sought from all participants and confidentiality of both their writing work and interview answers was confirmed during the study.

### **The Study**

#### **Participants' Diversity of Languages**

All of the interviewed participants could understand, speak, read/write at least more than one language, including English. The lowest number being two, and the highest four, excluding English. Participants could speak a variety of languages which included a mix of North and South Indian languages, namely Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Malayalam, Tulu, Gujarati, Punjabi, Marathi, and Kannada (Table 1.1). There was a clear distinction for the participants in the usage of their native mother tongue and 'family language'. They preferred to speak in their 'family language' even though they were taught at school in their native mother tongue. On the question of the participant's first and second language, three out of seven participants' first language was English and the rest of them identified their mother tongue as their first language and English as their second language (Table 1.2). The participants used English

predominantly in the university-wider higher education context, as the majority of interactions among the research students and their supervisors, or members of staff, required the use of English. These results show that while continuing to speak their vernacular language, the students understood the importance of English and of being a multilingual in a university/social context, student SK commenting that *“Multilingualism is a boon as it gives an added identity check in HE”*, with SP noting *“Yes, being a multilingual has initially affected my understanding but gained confidence and has overcome it.”*

Table 1.1 Diversity of Languages among Participants

Participant	Languages
AP	Hindi, English, Urdu, Marathi
SB	Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, English
MB	Hindi, Punjabi, English, Urdu
SK	Marathi, Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, English
MS	Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Kannada, English, Tulu
SP	Telugu, Tamil, Hindi, English
VC	Tamil, Telugu, English

Table 1.2 First and Second Language of the participants

Participant	First	Second
AP	Hindi	English
SB	Tamil	English
MB	Hindi	English
SK	English	Hindi
MS	English	Hindi
SP	Telugu	English
VC	English	Tamil

### Awareness of Academic Writing

In terms of writing, most of the participants found it easier to express their ideas in English while one participant found a native language useful. Participants had the experience of academic writing at various levels of their studies. At school, all of the participants had taken written/oral exams in English for different subjects. Six of the participants had completed their undergraduate studies in India and one participant in the United Kingdom. The participants had written assignments and technical reports during the course of their undergraduate studies. The final projects, which the participants had to submit were mostly of a group nature, with individual workload divided among the members of the group. However for their Master degrees, the participants had to write assignments and also submit an individual thesis. When inquired about fluency in English, four participants denied any lack of fluency in using English, while three participants found difficulty in English while writing academic works, mainly in the initial understanding of the concept and grammar. The textual analysis was performed by using the PG Cert. marking criteria, in accordance with the University standard expectations for a research degree.

### Support for English Academic Writing

The participants were all interviewed about the support they received for their academic writing (Table 1.4). All of the participants acknowledged they were aware of the

services delivered by BCU's 'in house' Centre for Academic Success (CAS) and all but three of the participants had not used CAS services, while the other participants had either used it for one or both of the checking of the grammar and structure of their Masters' thesis. One of the participants had even been employed by CAS during the course of their taught postgraduate degree and commented that CAS offered structured feedback on the thesis. One participant also identified that CAS services was introduced as a part of Masters Induction program. For their research writing, all of the participants received feedback and support from the Faculty. Research supervisors and Mentors often proof read their work and extended help with the structure, topic and context. Participants found the support from the supervisors and mentor to be timely, useful and the feedback/'feed-forward' productive. Additionally peer feedback was also found useful by participants as it provided different views on their work before the actual submission from peers in the same and related fields of expertise, for example, SK listed "supervisors, friends, peers who provide constructive feedback" SB echoed this listing "supervisors and peers in the lab.

Table 1.4 Support for academic writing

<b>University Support</b>	<b>Faculty Support</b>	<b>Peer Support</b>
Centre for Academic Success	Mentor & Supervisors	Peers in the same & related fields
Services availed for Master's Thesis; Suggestions on the whole format rather than on details (2/7)	Help with structure, topic, and context. Including Feedback & Proof reading opportunities (7/7)	Feedback & Proof reading (7/7)

### **IELTS versus Postgraduate Certificate Experience**

Prior to commencing their PhD study, every participant had to take the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test as a mandatory entry requirement for their course. The IELTS score showed the participants' overall English language capability in four distinct areas of language use: speaking, reading, listening and writing. The IELTS scores of the participants are shown in Table 1.5. The scores were considered as evidence of the participants' perceived English language proficiency for this study. None of the participants had taken any preparatory course or other forms of English courses prior to their IELTS.

Table 1.5 Participants' English Language Proficiency – Overall IELTS SCORE

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Overall IELTS SCORE</b>	<b>Research Methods Module Score</b>	<b>Research Skills Module Score</b>
AP	6.5	66%	68%
SB	6.5	58%	55%
MB	7	55%	52%
SK	7.5	55%	51%
MS	7.5	62%	65%
SP	7	51%	51%
VC	6.5	55%	55%

During the initial six months of PhD research at BCU, all students are required to study for the Postgraduate Certificate (PG. Cert) course in research skills. This course emphasises the procedural knowledge and the practical aspects of carrying out an academic research project. It focuses on meeting the research training needs of students in order to

support them during the development of their own individual research proposals. The course seeks to develop reflective debate and discussion in the range of methods of carrying out research. Participants in this research were requested to provide their scores for the PG. Cert as a part of this study and participants' samples of academic writing were also compared with the assignments they had to complete for the course (Table 1.5). The participants were asked about their experiences of the course. Almost every participant agreed that the PG. Cert course was their initial knowledge-gaining venture in research academic writing. Participants described that it was through studying the PG. Cert they understood the basics and application of the literature review and referencing styles/standards required for studying for a research degree, SB commenting that the course had "...helped in critical thinking and had made clear the level/styles of writing in research and MB noting that he had learnt "how to do a literature review".

PG. Cert. scores show that the students have passed both the assignments, but still have space for improvement, provided they receive adequate support. The marks obtained for the PG. Cert varied when compared with the participants' IELTS scores (Figure. 1.1). The data shows that all participants' passed the PG Cert. in Research Skills, however, in comparison to their IELTS scores there is a considerable difference in their level of attainment. The IELTS scores could be an indicator for students' perceived academic writing ability, whereas the PG Cert. scores revealed a more accurate picture of their academic writing ability.

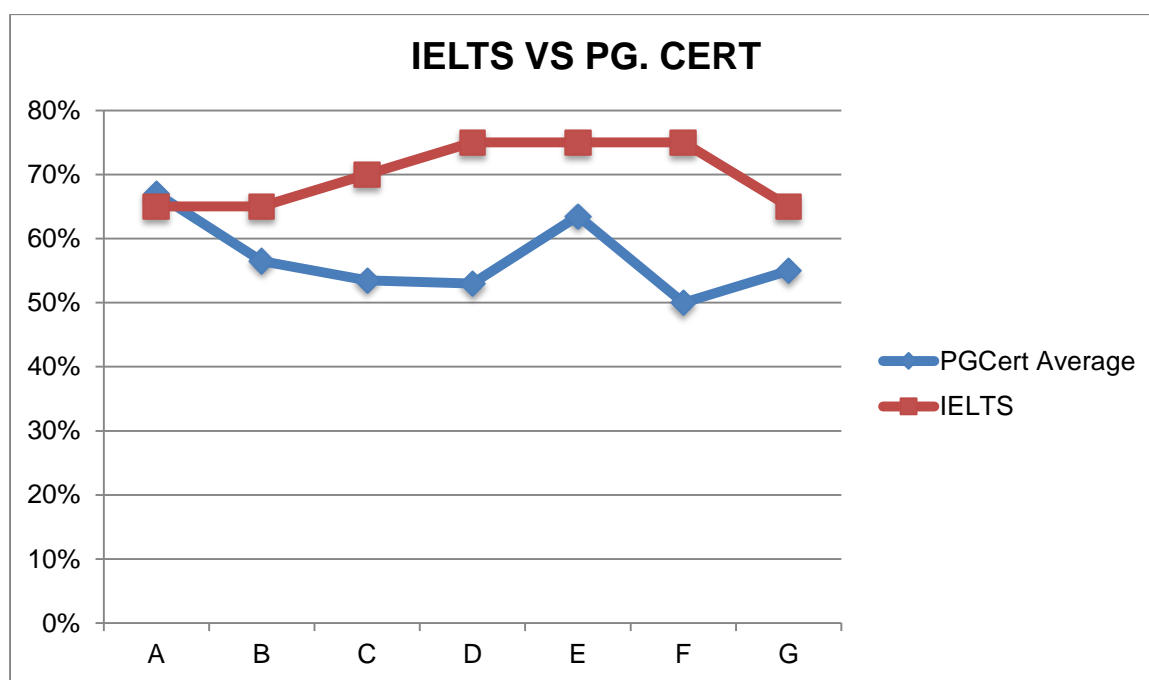


Figure 1.1 IELTS VS PG. Cert

The comparison would have been easier if participants' scores on just the writing section of the IELTS test were compared to the PG Certificate in Research Skills scores, this would either show how they had improved or otherwise to offer recommendations for improvement, however this was not possible. Also, when asked about the PG Certificate in Research Skills experience, participants remarked that the course changed their viewpoints about academic writing, and helped in encouraging critical thinking. Participants acknowledged that the course also clearly demonstrated the different levels and styles of writing in research and helped them identify major changes in their writing when compared to their own Master level written works. One participant remarked, "I had mixed feelings



about the course. I initially felt very confident at the start of my PhD study, which then turned “scary and confusing”, before I gradually overcame the emotions to finish with submission of my assignments”.

### **Effect of Multilingualism in Academic Writing**

Clear distinction about different forms of academic writing was evident in the participants. Since the participants were from engineering and computer science disciplines, they preferred writing technical reports, as required by their industrial partners, as it provided them with specificity in the tasks. Participants also remarked that a technical report is an easier way of conveying ideas or information, using technical data and diagrams, whereas the thesis format seemed ‘scary’ with the more complex structuring of the content. In general, the participants had concerns over grammar, topic, context and structure associated with academic writing, with specific concerns about vocabulary (e.g. paraphrasing), and the literature review.



Figure 1.3 Participants' concerns in academic writing

Finally, when asked about how they felt their multilingualism affected their academic writing, most of the participants (6 out of 7) remarked that it had no effect on their academic writing. One participant claimed that being a multilingual person restricted flexibility in English. This participant also pointed out the difficulty was mainly in sentence structuring, using the correct tense and grammar. The participant explained their thinking process was mainly in their native language, although this is now gradually shifting to include English, which is making academic writing easier. Another participant felt that multilingualism had actually affected their academic writing in a positive way. Having experienced schooling in English, one participant felt English had always been their primary language and being multilingual had never created any difficult feelings at all. Being a multilingual person, initially affected the understanding of contexts for one participant which had gradually changed as they had gained confidence. On the other hand, four participants revealed that conversing/writing in English over a longer period of time had an effect on their native languages. Often the participants found tricky and hard to find the correct word while conversing with friends and family. They hardly used their native languages for writing purposes; even in a social context like Facebook. Participants identified usage of English alphabets to describe their native language. The research shows that being multilingual did not unduly affect the academic writing of the students who were interviewed. While some did raise concerns about their academic writing, they all agreed that such concerns, such as the ‘skills’ they possessed (or did not possess) were more important than their multilingualism.

The multilingual knowledge and acquisition among the participants were attributed to their growing up in a multicultural country – India. Regarding the use of multilingual knowledge, it had no effect on their academic writing in their respective research context and the participants found favourable use for their multilingual resources. The results of this study show that being a multilingual person is more about the participants' identity which is in accordance with the sociolinguistic perspective on multilingualism (Wei, & Moyer 2008). The participants agreed that the English language was an effective means of communication for them in their research context and also crucial in shaping their identity of being an international student in the University.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

The main conclusions of the study can be summarised into three sections as follows:

#### **A. Participants' Academic Writing Abilities:**

- There was a recognizable gap between the participants' perceived (based on IELTS) and actual academic writing abilities;
- The participants' own perception of academic writing fluency was not reflected in their PG Certificate in Research Skills scores where only one participant was consistent in terms of the IELTS and PG Certificate in Research Skills scores.

#### **B. Effect of Multilingualism on Participants' Identity:**

- Participants acknowledged that multilingualism only affected their initial confidence of their English speaking abilities where they attributed their multilingual knowledge and acquisition to growing up in multicultural country, India;
- In research contexts, the participants agreed that the English language effectively formed a medium of communication in the University and social contexts, and being a multilingual was crucial in shaping their identity of being an international student;
- In contrast, participants also revealed that conversing and writing in English had an effect on their native language abilities.
- Multilingualism and Academic Writing:
- Six out of seven participants responded that they felt that their multilingualism had little effect on their academic writing and three out of seven agreed that they used their native language to understand the topic and context while writing. This confirms that the participants do have concerns over academic writing but they are predominantly skills-related as opposed to being linked to their multilingualism;
- In research context, one participant pointed out that the difficulties were mostly in sentence structuring and it was effectively linked to the cognitive thinking process in their own native language.

### **Further Research**

This study was the first effort to identify the multilingualism identities among the research students in the faculty. Further research would be to extend this study to include more participants from different schools in the faculty and even consider both multi- and bi-linguistic students and the effects of such support in their academic writing. This will be helpful to develop a useful strategy to support international research students at the faculty level in their academic writing ventures.

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