Academic socialisation through collaboration: Textual interventions in supporting exiled scholars' academic literacies development

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Abstract

This paper explores how co-authorship, as a type of collaborative writing practice, facilitates the academic literacies development of scholars in exile who use English as an Additional Language (EAL). Drawing on examples from a larger study looking into Syrian exiled scholars' academic literacies development, we discuss Areas and Levels of Textual Intervention (AoTI and LoTI) in co-authorship practices.

Key Words

Academic literacies
Collaboration
Textual intervention
Syrian academics

Introduction

Academic collaborations are useful ways of bringing together knowledge and expertise of researchers from different fields, methodological interests, and diverse experiences to develop new insights into a phenomenon. One form of collaboration is co-authorship, i.e. joint production of publications which, when involving researchers of different levels of experience, can be considered an academic socialisation tool where the more experienced researchers assist the less experienced ones in understanding the requirements and expectations of the academic community they wish to enter. This type of collaboration can be particularly invaluable as a way of helping exiled academics who wish to enter the international academic community but may not have had the experience of disseminating their research internationally. There are some promising examples of collaborative work between Syrian exiled academics and centre-based academics ('centre' here refers to the Anglophone, global North centre of knowledge production; for more information, see Lillis and Curry (2010) through support programmes such as the Syria Program (Parkinson *et al*., 2018; Parkinson *et al*., 2020). Parkinson *et al*. (2018) reported that the Syrian scholars valued the long-term benefits of such research collaborations in their academic careers. Thus, the exiled academics perceive collaboration, along with the co-authorship practices involved, as an academic socialisation process.

Socialisation into a 'publish or perish' academic culture entails developing one's academic literacies, and co-authorship can be seen as an essential approach to academic socialisation (Darvin and Norton, 2019). Of relevance here is research

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on the role of written feedback, i.e. written comments on a draft provided by a teacher or a peer, which has been recognised as a form of socialisation of less experienced writers (see Fujioka, 2014; Seloni, 2012). Giving feedback to EAL (English as an Additional Language) writers, particularly EAL students, and its effect on writing development remain controversial areas that have received a considerable amount of attention in the field (Bitchener, Young and Cameron, 2005). Seror (2014) studied feedback as an academic socialisation experience of a Japanese university student, Yoshimi, studying Philosophy in Canada. Methods used in this study included biweekly semi-structured interviews with the participants during the eight months' period of the study, in addition to collecting documents relating to students' writing, such as their drafts, feedback they received and the assignment prompts. In investigating the effect of feedback on Yoshimi's socialisation process, Seror (2014) found that the way Yoshimi, among others, viewed himself as an EAL writer was impacted on by one of his professors' focus on grammar when giving him feedback. Darvin and Norton (2019) provide, through auto-ethnography, an account of how their mutual co-authorship resulted in socialising the less experienced writer, Darvin, to the academic community. However, missing in this account is a description of how the co-authors interacted and what exactly in their collaboration facilitated Darvin's socialisation. Gaining an understanding of the dynamics of collaboration on texts – whether in joint text production or in cases of the more experienced writer providing feedback to the less experienced writer – is key to understanding how collaboration facilitates academic literacies development. This knowledge can significantly contribute to developing more effective support to early career academics or those moving from one academic environment to another, as is the case of academics in exile. Thus, in this paper we look at co-authorship between a 'more' and a 'less' experienced academic, focusing specifically on the areas and levels of textual intervention in collaborative text production.

Overview of the study

Our study looks into academic literacies development of Syrian academics in exile in Turkey and the UK supported by Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics). We have used ethnography as a method, via talk-around-text interviews; ethnography as a methodology, via textual analysis of feedback comments, textual analysis of the Syrian academics' writing, writing logs, network logs, and interviews with both the Syrian academics and their co-authors; and ethnography as 'deep theorizing' (Lillis, 2008), via analysis of voice development. In this paper, we explore co-authorship drawing on examples from one case, Ahmad (pseudonym), a Syrian academic working in the field of life sciences and based in the UK, who had successfully published more than ten articles in international journals while in exile. Data sources include interviews with Ahmad and his co-author, Julia (pseudonym), a senior UK-based academic, as well as Ahmad's drafts and Julia's feedback on them.

In the following section, we discuss two aspects related to co-authors' feedback that emerged from the textual analysis of the co-author's textual intervention: Area of Textual Intervention and Level of Textual Intervention. We use the term 'textual intervention' rather than 'feedback' to highlight the broader scope of the co-author's responses, which range from providing directive comments on the author's draft, engaging in a disciplinary dialogue, to writing or rewriting parts of the draft. We use 'author' to refer to Ahmad, who is the author of the draft under discussion, and 'co-author' to refer to Julia, his co-author, who makes textual interventions.

Area of Textual Intervention (AoTI)

By AoTI, we mean the area of writing co-authors comment on. This has been studied by researchers investigating feedback provided to student writers, as mentioned above. Research on EAL student writing instruction distinguishes between form and content areas of feedback (see Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994). In his study into student writing in subject areas of Business, Science, Engineering and Arts in Hong Kong University, Hyland (2013) found that faculty members focused on disciplinary areas in their feedback involving how to craft discipline-appropriate arguments that are understood by the academic community in their disciplines. Tutors reported being less concerned

about grammatical issues; instead, they were primarily concerned about 'teaching them to write logical essays which take a research question and address it in a structured and thoughtful way with evidence and logical conclusions' (Hyland, 2013: 244). In research on academics' writing practices, of particular relevance here is Lillis and Curry's (2006) study of literacy brokers, a term they use for individuals who help EAL scholars when writing in English. In their in-depth study of writing for publication practices of 30 multilingual Psychology academics in Hungary, Slovakia, Spain, and Portugal, they found that their participants' literacy brokers' foci of feedback ranged from sentence-level language issues to academic content-related issues. This range of areas of literacy brokering led them to distinguish between two types of brokers: 'academic professionals' who 'orient to knowledge content and claims, [and] discipline-specific discourse' and 'language professionals' who 'tend to focus on sentence level revisions and direct translations' (Lillis and Curry, 2006: 15-16).

While our study shares the focus on EAL scholars' publishing in English with what Lillis and Curry (2006, 2010) reported on, the literacy brokers in our study were also the co-authors of the drafts, which made their roles more complex, resulting also in a wider range of the areas they commented on. We identified the following broad Areas of Textual Intervention: disciplinary conventions, academic writing conventions, and publishing conventions. It should be noted here that all of the co-author's comments are quoted verbatim; however, information that could reveal the identity of the participants is edited out.

Textual interventions focusing on disciplinary conventions include a range of disciplinary aspects, such as:

Disciplinary terminology: Julia replaced the words 'cattle and sheep' in Ahmad's draft with the more disciplinary appropriate term 'ruminants' because 'that was the appropriate disciplinary word that should be used.' (Julia, Ahmad's co-author).

Disciplinary argument: Julia asked Ahmad to discuss the results of their study with reference to previous studies reaching both similar and different results to theirs: 'It would be wise to compare and contrast the result with more than one report. Indicate reports that have both similar and different results from what you are presenting'. Here the co-author is asking the Syrian academic to enrich the discussion section, which lacked in discussion on different perspectives.

Positioning the research: Julia asked Ahmad to reconsider his theoretical positioning: 'Can you provide an evidence for this? It sounds like an argument by a feminist. The reality is not necessarily in line with the arguments of such groups.'

Textual interventions focusing on academic writing conventions include comments about the following issues:

Missing information: 'Where in the study did you measure water intake?'

Organisation: 'Move this part to the end of the previous section.'

Coherence: 'Be consistent between the two materials over use of Latin binomials.'

Appropriacy and accuracy of expression: (including issues related to grammar, typographical errors, repetitions): commenting with '!!!' on the space between two acronyms.

Precision of information: Julia's comments focused on enhancing accuracy of their account 'Are you sure this is accurate? Check again.'

Publishing conventions related feedback focused on the following:

Reader awareness: 'You might struggle to convince reviewers how this actually increases the pressure on mixed FS.'

Journal-specific expectations: 'Get a copy of the paper available at [name of journal] and follow the structure carefully. See how they structured the paper.'

We should mention here that those aspects of the three discussed areas are not exhaustive. In this paper we only provide examples emerging from our data.

Level of Textual Intervention (LoTI)

We introduce here the concept of LoTI, defined as the extent to which the co-author intervened in the text. Figure 1 below shows five Levels of Textual Intervention illustrated with examples from our data, with LoTI1 being the highest level of textual intervention and LoTI5 being the lowest.

The Textual Intervention Levels differ in both the space for negotiation given to the author as well as the amount of textual engagement:

> At LoTI5 there is minimal textual engagement; the co-author is either unable to understand the text or considers it unacceptable. This approach leaves an open space to the author to respond (e.g. by rewriting the section in the way he wishes or by asking for clarification) but because of its vagueness, the author may not understand the co-author's intended message.
>
> At LoTI4 the co-author asks a question which could be either a genuine one (i.e. the co-author needs more information to understand the issue) or could serve as an indirect request to the author to include the missing information in the paper.
>
> LoTI3 is a teacher-like intervention, which includes an evaluative comment ('good') and instruction ('explain…'). Feedback at this level provides clear suggestions for the author and leaves little space for negotiation to the author.
>
> At LoTI2, the co-author decides to take the responsibility for writing a part of the text and informs the author accordingly.
>
> At LoTI1, the co-author revises the text by themselves.

Both LoTI2 and LoTI1 involve the co-author writing or rewriting a part of the text, and Julia reported having several reasons for this type of intervention, one of which was to provide Ahmad with models of writing a particular part of the genre (e.g. discussion section) or about a particular disciplinary issue in an appropriate academic style. Additionally, the difference between LoTI1 and LoTI2 is that LoTI2 leaves more space for the author to try to rewrite the section themselves, whereas in LoTI2 the co-author's intervention is more difficult for the author to contest although this option is still open to them. As we have seen in our larger study, as Ahmad's confidence as an academic writer developed, he started making changes even to the feedback at LoTI1, i.e., rewriting the sections written by his co-author.

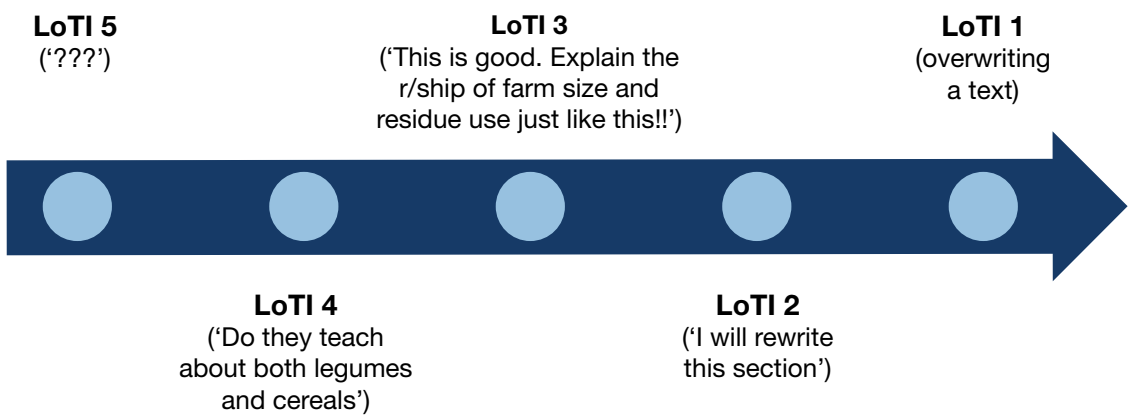

Figure 1. Level of Textual Intervention (LoTI)

Implications: AoTI and LoTI as practical tools in co-authoring practices

Our research demonstrates that co-authorship, as a form of collaboration, is an important part of exiled scholars' academic socialisation into the international academic community. Therefore, it is important for co-authors working with exiled academics to consider writer development rather than merely improving the text. We suggest this can be achieved by focusing on the different areas of textual interventions as discussed above as well as by making textual intervention at different levels of engagement. The co-author could choose varied levels of textual intervention when focusing on the same area. For example, when commenting on missing information, the co-author could consider giving suggestions for improvement that provide a template which could be adapted in other papers for similar purposes (i.e. LoTI3). For example, one of Julia's comments provided such a template: 'xx comprise of xx, x etc.??? … They are mainly used as feed for xxx? thrown away? etc. They can be preserved by x or x. This review evaluates the x.' Here the Syrian academic only needed to fill in the spaces. Another comment in the same draft focusing also on missing information intervened at LoTI5 where Julia wrote '???' next to a place in the text where she identified an incomplete account. Ahmad reported finding the mix of approaches rather helpful. We also observed that Ahmad learnt considerably from Julia's textual interventions and was able to transfer these skills to his new writing projects.

We believe the examples and insights provided in this paper could be of benefit to those supporting academic writing development of EAL exiled academics, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) tutors, by shedding light on how exiled academics could collaborate with more experienced centre-based academics on joint publications and, more specifically, on the types and levels of textual intervention experienced academics can make on their less experienced colleagues' draft work. This understanding, together with the examples above that may be incorporated in teaching materials, may result in more authentic EAP teaching.

Co-authorship is a practice that is normally hidden from view; it is also a practice guided by academics' tacit knowledge. Nevertheless, making this knowledge overt could also be helpful to centre-based academics, which could raise their awareness of the kind of support that is needed and the different ways the exiled academics can be supported to facilitate their academic socialisation.

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