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An Academic Writing Needs Assessment of Clinical Investigators who have English as their Second Language

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Abstract: The purpose of this project was to assess ESL clinical investigators' learning needs for academic writing for English scholarly publication. We used a qualitative evaluation approach to examine the gap between the current and desired proficiency level for academic writing of seven ESL clinical investigators. We considered the perspectives of these seven ESL clinical investigators and those of three mentors' and three writing instructors' in this assessment. The findings suggest that ESL clinical investigators do not accurately perceive their writing deficiencies, have little knowledge of criteria for academic writing, and their prior experiences create passive attitudes toward seeking appropriate writing resources. Adequate time is especially needed to develop successful writing skills. We provide suggestions for program planners to develop academic writing services and present useful information for pedagogical practice by adult educators in higher and continuing professional education regarding ESL academic writing.

Introduction

Academic writing is competitive and seemingly demanding for the novice scholar. Researchers are required to produce a stream of English publications to demonstrate their "research output" for academic career development (Flowerdew, 1999). A national survey of associate professors of family medicine revealed that a paced career with an early beginning aimed at 32 publications required 5.4 starts of writing per year during the probationary years as Assistant Professors (Neuhauser, McEachern, Zyzanski, Flocke, & Williams, 2000). Pressure to publish is compounded for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) academic writers who struggle with additional difficulties of mastering the English language. Unfortunately, existing writing assistance in higher education seems not to prepare them well for English scholarly publication (Sundre, 2002). Many post-doctoral students and junior faculty enter American graduate schools and workplaces directly from their native countries without having received the kind of composition instruction typically found in U.S. secondary schools and colleges (Frodesen, 1995).

During the Clinical Investigator Preparatory Program (CIPP) scientific writing workshops, we observed that a growing number of ESL clinical investigators experience unique academic writing difficulties compared to their native English speaking peers and their academic writing needs have not been addressed through the venue's existing learning activities. Although the campus's Writing Center provides one-on-one tutoring, their services are time limited and restricted by tutors with non-specific or limited skills in ESL academic writing instruction. The purpose of this project was to assess ESL clinical investigators' learning needs when writing for English scholarly publication. The findings can be used to develop academic writing services in

a similar educational context as the CIPP and provide useful insights for adult educators in higher and continuing professional education.

Methods

The proficiency theory of adult learning proposed by Knox (1986) was used as a conceptual framework to identify ESL clinical investigators' writing needs in this study. At the core of his theory is the understanding of discrepancies between current and desired proficiencies as perceived by self and others as a basis for decision making. We reject a narrow focus on individual learner deficiencies as the only cause of writing problems (Collins, 1991; Tait, 1999) in favor of a discrepancy notion to address ESL researchers' writing-related educational needs.

A qualitative evaluation approach was used to assess the academic writing learning needs of seven ESL clinical investigators (hereafter referred to as "ESL researchers") through their own perspectives and those of three CIPP mentors' and three academic writing instructors' so that interventions which are learner-centered could be designed to facilitate the ESL researchers' writing process. A snowball sampling strategy was used to identify ESL researchers who were potential or current trainees in the CIPP at the UW-Madison and a fixed sampling strategy was used to select the mentors and writing instructors. Semi-structured questions were asked during a 50-60 minute interview. We recorded field notes during the interviews with a strategy described by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) and organized them into observational notes, theoretical notes, and methodological notes. The constant comparative method was used to analyze field notes in an inductive way (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A literature review of relevant knowledge augmented the assessment process.

Results

Learning Goals and Standards Are Ill Defined So That ESL Researchers Do Not Accurately Perceive Their Writing Problems

ESL researchers indicated their lack of knowledge of and desire to understand criteria for (a) scholarly publication and (b) independent writing. They were confused about an appropriate standard of language skills for scholarly publication. Two ESL researchers questioned the fairness of following English standards as an ESL writer. One said, "It's unfair that English is the major language." They expected opportunities for sharing journal editors' perspectives. Most ESL researchers indicated that they want to write confidently and easily, have good writing experiences, and be efficient at finding and using resources for writing and solving problems independently and effectively. These desired English academic writing proficiency levels are influenced by ESL researchers' personal inspirations, career goals, workplace requirements, mentor's instruction and organizational support.

CIPP mentors commented that ESL researchers lack adequate writing experience and basic understanding of academic writing for scholarly publication. Instructors in the Writing Center emphasized that program planners should indicate how effective they want the researchers' academic writing to be because it is an endless progressing process. According to them, a major objective of a writing program should be to enhance professionals' self-directed learning abilities by setting explicit and reasonable learning objectives and assessing individual progress.

Having little knowledge of performance criteria and ways to achieve them, ESL researchers are not fully aware of their learning objectives for writing. They have limited knowledge of the

types of effective writing assistance and strategies to improve writing skills. Their motivation to improve their English writing skills is not sufficiently strong to spend extra money and time attending a formal academic writing class and is often driven by heavy work and study loads. Instead, they learn by trial-and-error through their work and study requirements. This approach requires time and tends to make them feel anxious and ineffective in their writing abilities. ESL researchers should learn about the process for scholarly publication, writing assistance available to them, and criteria used by editors to assess manuscripts so that they can establish clear learning goals and performance criteria.

ESL Researchers Tend To Value the Content of Their Written Materials over Grammatical Correctness and Organizational Coherence

ESL researchers have various English academic writing levels according to their cultural backgrounds, mother language influences, personal aspirations, workplace requirements and previous English learning and writing experiences. Generally, they value content knowledge over writing skills when they have limited time to write. Specific difficulties reported by ESL researchers include tense, word usage, grammar, sentence structure and organization. Mentors were most concerned about “sentence-level” correctness and expected them to work hard to correct English. In contrast, writing instructors commented that ESL researchers are not fully aware of their problems with organization and discourse and pay more attention to sentence-level correctness. Writing instructors pointed out that specific ESL writing mistakes include the following: (a) improper manuscript formats, (b) limited vocabularies and simple sentence patterns, (c) organizing ideas and ordering arguments without coherence, (d) using flowery speech without conciseness, and (e) excessive quotation of sentences from books without putting the ideas in their own words.

ESL Researchers’ Passive Attitudes Formed by Cultural Experiences Create Barriers to Learning

ESL researchers have no or very limited academic writing class experience in their home country. Their perception of an English class is restricted to instruction in grammar and they have little knowledge about audience awareness, rhetorical patterns, coherence, tones, and composition skills and strategies that are typically taught in American composition classes. Mentors expect that ESL researchers are strongly motivated, have positive attitudes to practice writing, and are willing to use English in daily life to improve general English ability. Mentors assume that once ESL researchers are inspired to achieve a higher level of proficiency, they will actively seek writing assistance. One writing instructor whose native language is Chinese observed that some ESL researchers develop a passive attitude toward seeking writing assistance because they think that their high scores on standardized English tests, like TOEFL and GRE, may cause them to “loose face” in attending academic writing classes sponsored by an campus ESL program. They perceive these classes as being designed for ESL students whose TOEFL score is below the required University standard.

ESL Researchers Need Resources to Help Them Identify Their Writing Problems and Mistakes and Facilitate Their Learning and Writing Process

ESL researchers are unaware of and lack experience using writing assistance that fits their academic writing needs. Only one ESL researcher reported that he used writing resources effectively, wrote confidently and knew how to do self-revision on his papers. His experience

indicates that the more writing resources ESL researchers use, the more independent they become. Both ESL researchers and writing instructors indicated that mentors play an important role as resources to motivate and instruct ESL researchers' to practice academic writing skills. Feedback is important in this process and should include responsive instruction in the form of questioning, discussion, dialogue, encouragement, revision, error explanation, and examples. Resources focused on providing clear standards and enhancing accuracy and confidence in the ESL academic writers are needed.

Adequate Time Is Especially Needed for ESL Researchers to Develop Successful Writing Skills

All ESL researchers indicated that time as a constraint for academic writing. As mentioned previously, all ESL researchers tend to learn by trial-and-error through their work and study requirements. They lack time for additional writing-related learning activities because of heavy work and study loads. In discussing the essential features of effective academic writing assistance, ESL researchers indicated the importance of organizational recognition, including funding and flexible work schedules for them to use writing resources. Additionally, they prefer writing activities with flexible time, such as on-site or on-line consultation and editing services, on-line or videotaped instruction, lists of writing resources and information, self-tutoring software, technical tools, and one or two-day writing workshops. Adequate time is needed for ESL researchers to develop successful writing skills.

Discussion

Flowerdew (1999) summarizes a number of key areas where ESL researchers experience difficulty in writing for publication: (a) grammar, (b) use of citation, (c) making reference to the published literature, (d) structuring of argument, (e) textual organization, (f) relating text to audience, (g) ways in which to make knowledge claim, (h) ways in which to reveal or conceal the point of view of the author, (i) use of "hedges" to indicate caution expected by the academic community, and (j) "interference" of different cultural views regarding the nature of academic processes. We found similar areas of difficulty in the population that we assessed. However, these writing difficulties are those most recognized by language teachers. Based on our findings, the ESL researchers are not fully aware of these difficulties or their desired proficiency level. Their lack of awareness may be due, in part, to lack of clear criteria used for academic writing. Many times ESL researchers express a need to know the criteria used by editors of scientific journals in assessing publishable manuscripts. A survey of editors of 50 major English language scientific dental journals revealed that over two thirds of editors cited the importance of complying with the journal's guidelines as a means to speed the process of publication (Radford, Smillie, Wilson, & Grace, 1999). This type of knowledge facilitates ESL researchers' socialization into an academic community.

The ESL researchers we interviewed have no or very limited academic writing class experience in their home country. Their perception of an English class is restricted to instruction in grammar and they may have no familiarity with audience awareness, rhetorical patterns, coherence, tones, and composition skills and strategies that are usually taught in composition classes in America. This perception contributes to the possible reason why ESL researchers seemed hesitant to attend formal writing classes. Mohan and Lo (1985) discovered that Hong Kong students' learning experiences with English composition were oriented more toward

accuracy at the sentence level than toward the development of appropriate discourse organization when compared to their peers in British Columbia. These types of experiences result in preconceived notions that writing courses will not match or meet their writing needs and help them to achieve the desired standard.

Socialization in academic culture is often overlooked by both content and language teachers. Johns (1990) argues that in the vast majority of college classes, especially in larger universities, instructors provide few opportunities for real conversation and partnership or for other practices that might initiate these novices into the academic culture. According to Samraj (2002), layers of contexts include academic institution, discipline, course, task, student and text. For ESL researchers in this study, time is an additional contextual element in the workplace that influences their abilities to develop academic writing skills.

Cooperative learning activities in writing, such as writing groups, are essential for developing learners' writing skills and help them become "socialized" into an academic community. Hvitfeldt (1992) advocates reading and discussion of authentic argumentative writing to help learners see how other writers follow certain organizational rules and make use of words and phrases to produce effective writing manuscripts. Regularly scheduled writing groups (Rankin, 2001) can overcome inaccurate perceptions of writing deficiencies, provide feedback on scholarly work, improve skills needed to write coherent and fluent documents, and facilitate proactive attitudes toward improving writing skills. Furthermore, collaboration and co-learning with peers and partners who have both shared goals and diverse perspectives can encourage persistence, depth, and application which help adult learners become more reflective, confident and self-directed (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Conclusions and Implications for Educational Practice

Based on our assessment of ESL researchers' academic writing-related educational needs and the literature cited herein, we recommend four basic steps to guide program planners in developing ESL writing activities for professional learning: *Step1*: Recognize discrepancies—identify various influences affecting ESL researchers' current and desired academic writing proficiency level and recognize discrepancies between these two levels to activate professional growth. *Step2*: Establish clear standards and performance criteria for scholarly writing—collect information and resources related to professional journals and books editors' and other academic writing experts' perspectives. *Step3*: Develop individual plans—clarify ESL researchers' writing discrepancies and set explicit, reasonable, and positive goals using an individual learning plan. Working with ESL researchers to develop individual learning plans that are suitable for their working schedule is likely to empower them to take ownership of developing academic writing skills. *Step 4*: Organize writing assistance in a long-term fashion—provide professional editing services and tutoring instruction, writing group activities and mandated writing courses taught by specialized instructors. Resources should be available through programs' websites and campus libraries. Instructional activities should integrate campus Writing Center tutoring, ESL program classes, departmental writing classes, and faculty members' consultation.

The long-term goal is to improve ESL researchers' fluency with oral and written English and gain greater familiarity with American culture so that they become confident and fluent in two languages and familiar with two cultures (Malu & Figlear, 1998).

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