‘The English is not the same’- challenges in thesis writing for second language speakers of English

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Abstract

In this article I describe my interaction as an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioner with a supervisor and her two postgraduate international students, both of whom were second language speakers of English (L2). Because of linguistic and relationship issues the supervisory experience for the parties was challenging and frustrating. I discuss the implications of this research and suggest that while linguistic difficulties impact negatively on the supervisory relationship this is exacerbated by the differing assumptions and expectations of the stakeholders. I argue however, that what is regarded as 'acceptable' English at our institutions has not been sufficiently interrogated and the belief that English as a native language (ENL) is the only acceptable variety of English needs further investigation. Such an investigation needs to take place in a forum where the less powerful voices of the EAP practitioners and the students will not be marginalised.

Key words: Academic English, language standards, L2 students, thesis supervision, language support

Introduction

George-Jackson (2010) argues that universities should adopt cosmopolitanism as the way to deal with the challenges facing them in the 21st century. She notes that such an approach "encourages the respect of individual cultures while simultaneously promoting global citizenry". She acknowledges that implementing this approach which is achieved "by minimising the identification of different cultures as the 'Other'" could prove problematic. Those of us involved in the education of international students at western universities applaud the sentiments but are concerned about the practice. While there is a growing acknowledgment of the importance of recognising and honouring cultural diversity "anglophonicity has become a hallmark of the contemporary academic and scientific world" (Chang and Swales 1999, 145). In addition the 'west-is-best' mentality is a powerful one and is often perpetuated not only by those whom it advantages but also those whom it marginalises (Phan 2008). Thus while it is easy to support the concept of a liberal and welcoming stance towards international students at western universities it is often difficult to translate these notions into practice. Perhaps this conflict is brought into sharpest focus in the intimate supervisor /student relationship.

That this relationship is often challenging for both parties is widely acknowledged. Johnson, Lee and Green (2000, 136) aver that such relationships are "as much marked by neglect, abandonment and indifference as (they are) by careful instruction or the positive and proactive exercise of pastoral power." It is widely recognised that the relationship is located "in a profoundly unequal power structure" (Mackinnon 2004, 396). Indeed Grant (2008, 10) maintains that the master-slave dynamic in these relationships "is alive and well in advanced higher education pedagogies". If these issues exist between students and supervisors who share the same cultural and linguistic background the position is far more complex for parties who came from widely differing educational and social systems. There is a great deal of evidence that L2 students and supervisors do not share the same expectations and assumptions about supervision practice and how the respective positions "ought to be taken up" (Grant 2003, 183).

Background

Earlier research at our university (Strauss, Walton and Madsen 2003; Strauss and Walton 2005) indicated that postgraduate staff were encountering numerous challenges in the supervision of international students. This research, coupled with my experience in student services as an EAP practitioner, and subsequently as a member of faculty working with my own postgraduate students, led to an invitation to assist two students and their supervisor in the thesis writing process. In return for this assistance it was agreed that I could write up the experiences as a research project.

I hoped that this project would allow me to explore a concept put forward by Green (2005). In an article about subjectivity and supervision Green argues that the practice of supervision needs to be reconsidered, that the traditional "isolated dyadic relationship" (2005, 153) between student and supervisor is not necessarily the best way to promote student success. While Green was focusing in particular on doctoral supervision it appears that this approach that reformulates supervision "ecoscoially, as a total environment within which postgraduate research activity …is realised" (ibid.) would be equally valid in some masters supervisions, particularly where there were distinct and obvious linguistic and cultural differences between the parties.

As is common practice at universities, students at our institution who are experiencing difficulties with the thesis writing process are referred to the student learning centre for help with language issues. Having worked at the centre I was well aware of the frustrations these staff experience. The marginalized position of EAP practitioners is well reported in the literature (Hamp-Lyons and Hyland 2005; Turner 2003; Zamel 1998; Chanock 2003). Their contribution as Zamel points out (1998, 257) is not considered part of "the 'real' work of the academy". Lecturers often have very little real understanding of the time involved in getting "to grips with the language" and underestimate the role of language in academic performance (Turner 2004, 97). Clerehan and Moodie (1997) argue that the optimal arrangement would see the supervisor in regular contact and collaboration with the academic language advisor so that issues can be identified and problems addressed.

I arranged to meet with the supervisor and students to discuss the challenges they were facing. Although English was not her first language the supervisor had been educated in English and had taught almost exclusively through the medium of English. She felt that her linguistic background should give her a greater understanding of, and patience with, the challenges her L2 students faced. However, almost a year into the supervision of these students she was frustrated by their lack of progress.

Nasser and Patrick were both mature students. Nasser, who was in his fifties at the time, had emigrated from Egypt a few years earlier. He held a masters and doctorate from an

Egyptian university, and had been employed in a senior position in one of the countries' ministries. Although the medium of instruction at the university is Arabic, university regulations called for both theses to be written in English. On the strength of these theses he was admitted to the Masters programme at our institution.

Patrick, who had worked as a high school teacher in his native Sri Lanaka,, was in his forties. He had an undergraduate degree from Sri Lankan university and had also completed a post graduate diploma in education. All his tertiary education had been through the medium of English. His IELTS score of 6.5 was sufficient to gain him entry to the Masters programme after his immigration to New Zealand.

The interviews I conducted with the supervisor and the students indicated that there were two main issues of concern that were closely interlinked. They were the students' mastery of English and the supervisory relationship.

Language issues

The students sent me copies of the work they had done on their theses. These drafts gave me a far greater understanding of their supervisor's concerns and the frustrations she was facing. Both students had great difficulty with what are generally regarded as basic grammatical skills: use of articles, prepositions, tense and punctuation. Sentence structure was problematic. Many of the sentences were very long and complex, and particularly in Nasser's case, appeared to be translated from his first language. Indeed when he was taxed on this issue he admitted that this was the practice he followed. It was also apparent that both were copying parts of sentences directly from sources and combining them with material copied from other sources, or with their own writing. Often these copied sections made no sense.

These problems were serious enough but of greater concern in Patrick's case was that there appeared to be no structure to the writing, and, at times, it appeared that he had simply written down a series of random thoughts. Often his headings bore no relationship to the text they headed.

Their supervisor had tried to make sense of the first few chapters but had apparently given up. As I was now assisting the students she told them that while she would work with them in areas around their data collection, she would not read their theses until they had been finalized.

Both students were embarrassed about their language difficulties. Nasser noted:

> It is for me still a little bit difficult because I have the vocabulary, the vocabulary is good but the problem I show to use my vocabulary and to write a good paragraph or to arrange the sentence in a good paragraph, or to be easier to understand for the readers.

Patrick expressed his concern about his academic writing describing it as “vague, not direct”. He admitted that he was embarrassed about his written work “First time I thought ‘Is it I am so poor in my language’ because I thought it is okay, but in [the discipline] way it had lots of errors”.

The students’ difficulty with language was not limited to academic English. They both found it difficult, particularly Nasser, to communicate with their supervisor. He felt that his supervisor should make allowances for the fact that he was not a first language speaker in their intercourse. Patrick’s spoken English was better than Nasser’s but he did not find it easy to communicate with their supervisor either. Communication was a source of frustration for her as well; she noted that “either they don’t know what to ask you or how to ask you or how to approach you”.

The supervisory relationship

Although communication difficulties obviously impacted on this relationship, problems were exacerbated by the differing expectations and assumptions of the parties. The supervisor defined supervision as “the process of guiding students to develop independent thinking, independent work, independent research”. Frustrated by their lack of progress she argued that she needed to be “more stern” with them and that it was “a fine balance between understanding their difficulties and making sure they do the work”. She contended that they appeared to be labouring under a misconception as far has her role as supervisor was concerned. On the one hand they seemed to view her as the first port of call for their personal difficulties yet on the other hand, were reticent about contacting her with study queries and requests for meetings.

In addition she was frustrated at the amount of time needed to supervise the two students. She pointed out too that as she did not view them as “good” students she was unlikely to be able to publish with them. She was unhappy that she was under pressure by her department to finalise the theses. There was quite obviously a conflict between her own career interests and the success of the students (Lee, 2008).

Nasser had, of course, worked with supervisors for his masters and doctoral degrees in Egypt. He defined supervision as “guiding and teaching” stating that the supervisor needed to assist the student “in every step he has to do”. The relationship needed to be very close and warm to be successful he maintained.

Despite the fact that this was his first experience of supervision Patrick had fairly firm ideas about the role a supervisor should play. He acknowledged that he had expected more guidance from her. He felt that “in the beginning she guided us correctly – now I think she thinks we have to develop our own … ideas”.

Lee (2008) discusses the dependence/ independence continuum in the supervisory relationship. Unfortunately Patrick and Nasser demonstrated all the characteristics of highly dependent students, requiring continual explanation and direction, and seeking constant approval and affirmation of their worth.

The role of the EAP practitioner

By the time I became involved it appeared that the theses had become a burden to the supervisor and the students. Unfortunately the supervisor’s reluctance to engage with the thesis writing process meant that trialling Green’s proposal or even the arrangement posited by Clerehan and Moodie (1997) where supervisor and language advisor work closely and collaboratively were not possible. The supervisor would only assist the students with their data collection and refused to read any drafts of chapters, maintaining that she would only do so once the theses were virtually completed. I had some sympathy for her position. She had spent far more time with these students during the initial phase of thesis than she would with first language students and was frustrated by the pressure she was under to hasten their completion.

The students emailed me sections of their thesis which I printed out and critiqued. They would then make an appointment to see me and we would work our way through the selected piece. Progress was painstakingly slow and, at times, inordinately frustrating. I noted after one session of over an hour that we had only covered three pages of work. Part of the problem was the due to the supervisor’s lack of involvement. Initially, suggestions as to how structure could be improved were met with anxious queries as to whether such changes would meet with the approval of the supervisor. At this stage, the supervisor was extensively involved in field work and not readily available for comment. I was hampered by my own ignorance of the discipline but felt constrained by the supervisor's lack of interest and was unwilling to contact her for advice. There were sections of both theses that I felt could have been dealt with more easily by the supervisor with little input from me. The methodology and findings section which offered these students fewer challenges linguistically were difficult for a discipline novice like me, and the time I spent here could more profitably have been used to explore the real problem areas in the other parts of the thesis such as the literature review and discussion section.

Progress was also slow because my concept had been to allow students to control the process as far as possible so the time tabling of our meetings was entirely on their initiative. At times weeks would pass and there would be no contact and then there would be a flurry of activity usually heralded by the department's request for a progress report.

Because the supervisor was not heavily involved the students turned to me for more and more guidance, transferring the need they had expressed earlier for a closer, more 'hands on' relationship. I could provide the moral support they required but not the discipline knowledge. However it was to a certain extent because of this lack that my sessions with the students turned almost unintentionally from 'feedback' to 'talkback' (Lillis 2003, 204). When the student arrived for the discussion I would invite him to explain the section to me. In essence I was moving from feedback with its tendency towards closed commentary to talkback which involves "focusing on the student's text in process, (acknowledging) the partial nature of any text and hence the range of potential meaning" (Lillis, 2003, 204). Nasser responded to this approach with delight informing me that the tables had been turned and he would teach. His explanations were usually far easier to follow than his writing and we would then negotiate the way in which these explanations would be framed in the context of the thesis. There was little doubt that this approach offered Nasser a chance to regain some of the self esteem that he had lost in the thesis writing process.

With Patrick the process was not as easy. He would attribute any request for clarification to my lack of familiarity with the subject and he would merely repeat what he had written earlier in the chapter. He had difficulty acknowledging the partial nature of his text and sought to explain difficulties by focusing on a deficit in the reader. While Nasser accepted that his relatively 'soft' area of research was accessible to the educated lay person it took some time for Patrick to trust my expertise sufficiently that he took my queries with the seriousness they warranted, and for our discussions to assume the characteristics of talkback.

After a year of meetings Patrick was galvanized into action. However after about nine or ten weeks, with the thesis virtually complete, he came to see me to say that he could no longer cope and could not continue. I urged him to seek counseling and take a break, but not to give up on something in which he had invested so much time and effort. I did not see Patrick for another six months and then only briefly when he came to thank me for my involvement, and to hand in his thesis.   Major changes had been made in the thesis but he did not elaborate on these. I heard later that he had been awarded his masters degree.

At the time of Nasser’s completion I regarded my involvement with him as part of a success story. When his thesis was examined one of the examiners remarked that “the English is excellent" and that the thesis was “well presented with a clear and logical format". However a few years on I have become more concerned about the role I played in both students’ experiences, and my assumptions around the thesis writing process.

Discussion

As indicated earlier the issue of language and supervisory relationships are closely intertwined. A warm and supportive relationship was important for both these students and they established it with the EAP practitioner rather than the supervisor. Had the supervisor and I worked more closely it is possible that I would have been able to act as an intermediary. As it was we had very little interaction during the 18 months I worked with the students.

It would, however, be naive to assume that language was the only barrier to a successful supervisory relationship, and other factors have been raised. However this article focuses specifically on the implications of differing linguistic expectations and assumptions. Initially both students entered into postgraduate studies confident that their mastery of English was such that it would not prove an impediment to postgraduate study. As Canagarajah points out (2001) the global spread of English has meant that many countries are familiar with its discourse features , and some non-English speaking countries require postgraduate theses and dissertations to be submitted in English. Such was the case for Nasser. Their confidence, as has been illustrated, was misplaced. As Nasser noted sadly, “the English is not the same”. What was an adequate command of English for tertiary study in their own countries was viewed as inadequate for the same purpose in an English speaking country, in this case New Zealand (Collins and Slembrouck 2005; Ryan and Viete, 2009; Simpson and Cooke 2010; Preece and Martin 2010).

In the case of Nasser and Patrick they came too, to view themselves as deficient. Their perception of themselves as 'lacking' appeared to have a serious impact on their self esteem and sense of agency. Supervisors have noted that second language students often feel "really diminished" no matter how sensitively language issues were approached, that they invariably felt "ashamed or useless" (Strauss, Walton and Madsen, 2003, 8) It was clear that Nasser and Patrick shared these feelings.

The problem is that their English was, by the standards of our institution, error ridden. It would appear quite reasonable that the institution, through its academic staff, has the right to impose English language standards. But in a global environment can we, or more importantly should we, unilaterally be imposing such standards? If ownership implies the right to determine what is acceptable and what is not who owns English (Phan 2008; Seidlhofer 2001; Widdowson, 1994)? Is it the native speakers of the language or the non-native speakers who are far more numerous? Widdowson (1994, 385) notes:

> It is a matter of considerable pride and satisfaction for native speakers of English that their language is an international means of communication. But the point is that it is only international to the extent that it is not their language. It is not a possession which they lease out to others, while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it.

The other issue, of course, has to do with the setting of standards:

> The very idea of a standard implies stability, and this can only be fixed in reference to the past. But language is of its nature unstable. It is essential protean in nature, adapting its shape to suit changing circumstances. It would otherwise lose its vitality and its communicative and communal value. (Widdowson,1994, 384)

Simpson and Cooke (2010, 71) complain of the "institutionalised anglocentricity" of UK Higher Education. Probably the same complaint can be levelled at New Zealand universities. The question is whether we wish to change and move to a more open and accommodating stance with regard to the English employed in our institutions. Strauss and Walton in their research with L2 postgraduate students found that some of them wanted their theses to have a "feel" (2005, 5) of their own language but met resistance from supervisors. Widdowson (1994, 382). says that students "are coax[ed] and coerc[ed] … into conformity". I have no doubt that Nasser received a commendation for his "excellent English" to a large extent because I “marshall[ed]” him through a “set of technical practices to ensure accuracy and conformity” (Candlin and Plum, 1999, 197).

Seidlhofer (2001) argues that while pedagogical practices surrounding teaching and learning English have changed dramatically there has been less interest in the language itself, but that the “default referent” (Seidlhofer, 2001, 135) is ENL – English as a native language. Seidlhofer believes there is a good case to be made for the replacement, in certain contexts, of ENL with ELF – English as a lingua franca. She claims that an empirical investigation of ELF as it is currently used “will show that a sophisticated and versatile form of language can develop which is *not* a native language” (2001, 146). She points out that English native speakers would then no longer feel that ‘their language’ is being “abused and distorted” (152).

There is no doubt that these are interesting and intriguing issues. What counts as “acceptable” English is a difficult, often emotive issue. I have frequently been surprised at the depth of emotion academics display in discussions of issues such as the use of the first person in thesis writing. Shelton contends that the possibility for different varieties of English “appalls or even terrifies some who think there is a ‘purity ‘ to be defended” (2007, 60). Another issue is what Widdowson terms “grammatical abuse” (1994, 381). He points out that grammar is often redundant and argues that it function is not primarily to ensure clarity but rather as a means of expressing social identity. It operates as a gate keeping system, “a shibboleth” (ibid.).

It is clear that the issue of ‘acceptable’ English is one that needs to be debated, and I believe that it is the responsibility of EAP practitioners to raise the issue. In a landmark article Pennycook (1997) distinguishes between vulgar pragmatism and critical pragmatism. In the EAP context the former embraces the status quo, buying into the concept of English as a neutral language. Adopting this view allows EAP practitioners to operate ‘a service industry to provide students with access to a neutral body of knowledge” (263). Pennycook suggests that EAP practitioners should embrace critical pragmatism which promotes a far more critical approach to practice. Rather than being ‘servants’ of discipline ‘masters’, practitioners need to become “directly involved with the pluralisation of knowledge in the present” (ibid.).

Earlier in this article mention was made of Grant’s view of the master/slave dynamic in supervisory relationships. Pennycook’s use of master /servant terminology with regard to EAP practitioners and faculty staff has disturbingly similar overtones. Both postgraduate students and practitioners have less status and thus less power than faculty members; they do not possess the “dictating mouth” (Gurevitch, cited in Grant, 2008, 13). This perception is supported by the literature both in Australia and New Zealand. Chanock’s claim (2007, 272) that EAP practitioners “often operate at the margins of academic life” both in terms of “space and status” is strongly echoed by other practitioners in both countries (Laurs, 2010; Craven, 2009;Velautham and Picard, 2009;Clerehan, 2007; Carter and Bartlett-Trafford, 2007; Stevenson and Kokkin, 2007; Crozier, 2007; Craswell and Bartlett, 2002).

Part of the problem, of course, is that the neoliberal approach to education which views education as “a commodity: something to be sold, traded and consumed” (Roberts, 2007, 350-351) has weakened the position of EAP practitioners (Manathunga, 2007). Much practitioner research is aimed at “proving” that EAP practitioners do have an impact on student learning, that, as learning centres, they are earning their keep (Fraser, Manalo and Marshall, 2010; Challis, Holt and Palmer, 2009). To exacerbate matters it appears from Australian research that within learning centres there is “considerable volatility” (Challis et al., 2009, p.375) with constantly shifting staff including those in leadership roles. As the authors point out this instability has a negative impact on practitioners’ influence and effectiveness. The consequences of an insecure environment are obvious. Faculties wield the power – and, at least in New Zealand and Australia it appears we have not moved on from the master/servant situation outlined by Pennycook 15 years ago.

If faculties are resistant to a more liberal approach to academic writing is there really anything that EAP practitioners can do? Is it simply a question of waiting for time to bring about changes? Rowland (2007) acknowledges the contradictions and tensions that practitioners face in their work, but he maintains that their role is more than just enhancing student learning, that there comes a point when we “need to articulate clearly what [we] believe higher education is for” (12). I believe that a more nuanced approach to the medium of communication in our higher education institutions is one such point.

The question then is how best this debate should be brought about. It appears that at least in the Australian/New Zealand context EAP practitioners speak mainly to each other (Velautham and Picard 2009; Chanock 2007), a situation brought about largely as a result of the difficulties outlined above. Yet if our voice is to be heard, these issues must be aired in a forum where our relatively weak position will not obscure the issues we raise.

To this end Ikas and Wagner’s (2009) discussion of Third Space, where groups from different backgrounds and potentials of power meet in an environment that gives “agency to the spatially marginalised" Kostogriz and Tsolidis, 2008:130) is important. It is clear that EAP practitioners are marginalised but so too are the international students whose voices are not heeded (Ryan and Viete, 2009, Cadman, 2000). There are discipline lecturers who are sympathetic to our concerns and would welcome open discussion where they are not constrained by the expectations and traditions of the faculties in which they work. For those who are concerned that we propose to open the floodgates with an 'anything goes' approach, such a forum will provide the opportunity to reassure them that this is not a call to abandon, or even lower, standards in academic writing , rather it is a call for the re-examination and re-negotiation of what is acceptable; a recognition that there are many varieties of English and that it is "both futile and inappropriate" to attempt to hold on to a single standardised English (Horner, 2006, 572). Horner (573) speaks of a "living English, one that rejuvenates the language by contesting standardized, dominant English terms, phrasings, and meanings in the light of ongoing, and differing, lives, contexts, values". Widening a forum to discuss an understanding of what constitutes "living English" would appear to be an important aim for EAP practitioners.

However such debate alone will not be sufficient to address the difficulties facing both supervisors and students. The linguistic challenges inherent in research writing are far from being the only factor complicating supervisory relationships at universities catering for widely divergent cohorts of students, and employing an equally diverse range of supervisors. Despite the growing recognition that supervision should be a shared responsibility among a number of participants "there is a persistent administrative and conceptual defaulting to a one-to-one relationship" (Lee and Green 2009, 616). The tacit acceptance of this presumption has serious consequences. In this case I had no avenue by which I could have my concerns considered with the seriousness (and respect) they deserved. We must move towards a greater understanding of "supervision-as- pedagogy" (ibid. 617). If we do so, if supervisors acknowledge that the current default hierarchical relationship does not best serve their students or themselves, we will go a long way towards realising Green's vision (2005) of a supervision team that caters more holistically and effectively for all our research students.

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