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Academic writing challenges for non-native English-speaking doctoral students: A sociocultural perspective

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Abstract
To ensure a genuinely inclusive academic environment, addressing the linguistic challenges faced by non-native English-speaking students is crucial for achieving epistemic access and success. In this qualitative study we focused on the academic writing challenges encountered by non-native English-speaking doctoral students at a South African university. We adopted a sociocultural perspective to explore the academic writing challenges faced by non-native English-speaking doctoral students, thus providing insight into how academic writing skills develop within specific social and cultural contexts. Additionally, we used focus groups to gather comprehensive insights into the writing experiences of non-native English-speaking doctoral students. Through coding and thematic analysis, the findings highlight students' linguistic challenges, mainly related to difficulties with grammar and adherence to academic writing conventions, the influence of cultural identity on writing, and the impact of institutional support and resources on writing practices. As such, institutions must recognise the value of diverse writing styles and encourage students to maintain their cultural identities while engaging with English academic writing, thus fostering a more inclusive academic environment in which linguistic diversity is respected.

Keywords: academic writing; doctoral students; higher education; linguistic challenges; non-native English speakers; sociocultural perspective; writing workshops

Introduction
The role of language is central in the debate on knowledge production in higher education. To ensure epistemic access and success, and a genuinely inclusive academic environment, addressing the linguistic challenges faced by non-native English-speaking students is crucial. At doctoral level, writing is central to successful completion of postgraduate studies (Itua, Coffey, Merryweather, Norton & Foxcroft, 2014), and "it is through writing that research projects … and subject knowledge are constructed and communicated" (Badenhorst, Moloney, Rosales, Dyer & Ru, 2015:1). Moreover, writing is not only perceived as a skill but rather a "sociocultural tool that [must] be learnt" (Gupta, Jaiswal, Paramasivam & Kotecha, 2022:2). However, in a multilingual country such as South Africa, this poses a plethora of challenges for students who are non-native English speakers because they not only grapple with linguistic deficiencies, but they also struggle to navigate the complexities of academic writing. More so, "non-native postgraduate students usually encounter enormous hurdles in manipulating correct writing, let alone, abiding by English native-like writing conventions" (Alfehaid & Alkhatib, 2024:2). As a result, these deficiencies "interfere with their researcher identity and authorial voice development" (Gupta et al., 2022:2) most notably through language expression and thought articulation.

Nonetheless, higher education institutions expect doctoral students to demonstrate advanced critical writing skills, regardless of the existence, or non-existence, of academic writing support interventions for non-native English-speaking doctoral students who grapple with challenges such as grammar and articulation of ideas (Gupta et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, academic writing at the doctoral level encompasses several complex nuances that students must master, although this is a mammoth task for non-native English-speaking doctoral students who must address their linguistic deficiencies first, before they can navigate the complexities of writing at doctoral level. The complexity of academic writing is further exacerbated by its requirement of a lengthy formal education and indoctrination into academic writing practices and expertise in discipline-specific discourse. Thus, non-native English-speaking doctoral students grapple with a double-thronged hurdle which encompasses linguistic deficiencies on the one hand and attempts to navigate complex disciplinary jargon on the other.

Interestingly, English-speaking doctoral students also struggle with communicating complex ideas to their peers, the scholarly academy and the public (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019), thus validating that both native and non-native English speakers are novices at academic writing skills. This perhaps elucidates that academic writing is a language foreign to both native and non-native English speakers, with the latter at a greater disadvantage because of the apparent linguistic deficiencies in English language grammar and mechanics. However, these challenges are not unique to South Africa or South African doctoral students. Studies from other developing contexts report analogous issues. For example, Rafi and Moghees (2023) find that Pakistani doctoral

candidates often struggle with writing mechanics and dissertation coherence, while Colombo and Rodas (2023) highlight that writing groups have enabled Latin American doctoral students to address similar academic writing demands. Such parallels suggest that the findings from this study have the potential to inform writing support practices in other multilingual, English-dominant doctoral environments.

Sociocultural diversity also influences the complexities and differences in the comprehension of and proficiency in the English language (Doyle, Manathunga, Prinsen, Tallon & Cornforth, 2018). Disciplinary and cultural backgrounds largely impact non-native English-speaking doctoral students' writing practices, which potentially "reflect specific cultural nuances that are not applicable or employed in different parts of the world" (Gupta et al., 2022:2). Further, writing is a socially situated practice within which doctoral students must locate or position themselves (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2015). Emerging research, although still minimal, explores sociocultural factors that impact non-English speaking doctoral students' academic writing practices, with the purpose of expositing the academic writing challenges that these students encounter.

The student participants in this study took part in writing workshops organised by the university's Centre for Graduate Support (CGS). As such, the CGS provides a unique and valuable lens through which to explore and address postgraduate students' academic writing deficiencies. In the study we focused on doctoral students because of their significant role in both current and future knowledge production and dissemination. Effective communication of their research findings in academic writing is vital for their success and influence in their respective fields. Despite this, the assumption and expectation that postgraduate students naturally possess sufficient and adequate academic writing skills is often incorrect, especially for those from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

We thus sought to answer the questions: "What are the academic writing challenges faced by doctoral students who are non-native English speakers?" and "What are the sociocultural factors that influence non-native English-speaking doctoral students' writing practices?" Through a sociocultural lens, we aimed to explore the academic writing challenges encountered by non-native English-speaking doctoral students at a South African university. We also aimed to answer the question: "How do sociocultural factors influence their writing practices and experiences?" in order to develop practical strategies to better support these students and foster a more inclusive academic environment. Furthermore, we envisage that this study will contribute to the broader discourse on creating a more inclusive and supportive academic environment at not only South African universities, but also non-South African higher education institutions with multilingual academic environments.

Literature Review

Existing literature highlights the complexities of academic writing of non-native English-speaking doctoral students, focusing on proficiency perceptions, the impact of language proficiency, and the role of institutional frameworks in shaping their writing experiences. Phyo, Nikolov and Hódi (2023) indicate that English language proficiency is essential for doctoral students, as it directly correlates with their ability to produce academic writing of high quality. Likewise, several researchers also found that English language proficiency predicts academic achievement among students, suggesting that those with higher proficiency levels tend to perform better academically (Sadeghi, Kashanian, Maleki & Haghdoost, 2013; Sibanda, B & Joubert, 2024). Assumably, doctoral students do not require intentional writing support due to their advanced academic status; yet research indicates the need for more support for non-native English-speaking doctoral students. Several studies highlight the challenges such doctoral students face in academic writing and the need for structured support (Gupta et al., 2022; Wang, Liardét & Lum, 2025). However, such research does not necessarily offer a sociocultural lens on the challenges that doctoral students encounter. The sociocultural context in which non-native speakers operate plays a critical role in their writing experiences; hence, this was the focus of this study.

Alfehaid and Alkhatib (2024) indicate a significant gap in understanding the differences in language skills between native and non-native postgraduate students, suggesting that non-native speakers often face unique challenges that hinder their academic performance. However, Bakla and Karakas (2022) note that difficulties in academic writing are prevalent across all groups of researchers, regardless of their linguistic background; thus, there is need for specific support systems tailored to non-native speakers. When designing structured support, Lei (2012) highlights the importance of understanding the diverse writing strategies employed by non-native speakers, which can differ significantly from those of their native counterparts. This illuminates the necessity for writing support that is cognisant of these differences and provides practical strategies to bridge the writing proficiency gap.

The emotional and psychological aspects of writing also contribute to the challenges that non-native speakers face. Shamsi and Osam (2022) discuss how the pressure to publish can exacerbate

the difficulties experienced by non-native doctoral students, leading to increased anxiety and a sense of isolation. This highlights the importance of peer collaboration and supervisor attitude and feedback mechanisms, which can provide emotional support and enhance the writing process. Such collaborative environments can foster a sense of community and help alleviate the pressures associated with academic writing.

Additionally, non-native English speakers often struggle with linguistic nuances of academic writing, such as hedges and boosters. Ningrum, Puspita and Mulyadi (2024) highlight that hedges are more frequently employed in academic writing than other discourse types, and non-native speakers may struggle with appropriate use. Haufiku and Kangira's (2018) exploration of hedging and boosting devices in academic discourse reveals that these linguistic strategies are about language proficiency and cultural nuances. In many African contexts, where indirectness and politeness are valued, hedges may be more pronounced, potentially leading to ambiguity in academic writing. This cultural backdrop can complicate the straightforward application of hedges and boosters, as students may inadvertently conform to cultural norms that do not align with the expectations of academic discourse in English. Sepehri, Hajijalili and Namaziandost (2019) argue that these interpersonal strategies are crucial for effective academic writing and should be explicitly taught to non-native speakers, as they may struggle to use them as expected in the academic context.

Additionally, non-native speakers struggle with organising their ideas and meeting the requirements for dissertation writing (Prasetyanti & Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2023). Non-native English speakers' experiences of dissertation writing reveal that linguistic barriers often intersect with relational dynamics in supervisory contexts, leading to frustration and miscommunication (Gupta et al., 2022). This highlights the need for supervisors to be aware of non-native speakers' unique challenges and adopt strategies that facilitate more transparent communication and understanding. This further calls for targeted writing support that can assist non-native speakers in navigating the complexities of academic writing.

Lastly, the impact of cultural differences on academic writing practices plays a role in academic writing. Zen, Rachmajanti and Apriana (2017) explore how cultural representation influences language production in educational contexts, suggesting that students' backgrounds can shape their writing styles and conventions. This cultural dimension is critical in South Africa, where language contestations (Dube, 2017; Sibanda, B & Joubert, 2024) and diverse student populations bring varying expectations and experiences to their academic writing. Institutions must recognise and accommodate these differences to create a more inclusive educational environment.

Flowerdew (2019) argues that the writing challenges faced by non-native English-speaking doctoral students are not merely individual but reflective of broader institutional biases that favour native speakers. Therefore, universities in South Africa and globally, must recognise these disparities and implement supportive interventions to help level the platform for non-native English-speaking doctoral students.

Theoretical Framework

In this study we employed the sociocultural perspective as a relevant theoretical framework for understanding the academic writing challenges faced by non-native English-speaking doctoral students at a South African university. In the context of academic writing, particularly for non-native English-speaking doctoral students, it is essential to approach literacy practices through a sociocultural lens. This perspective emphasises the interplay between individual students and their sociocultural environments and how cultural contexts, identities, social interactions, and communal practices shape language use (Fazalehaq, Mahn & Reierson, 2020). The sociocultural perspective emphasises a key issue that is often lacking in academic literacy; academic writing is not merely a set of neutral and decontextualised skills to be acquired but rather a complex social practice deeply embedded within specific cultural, communal and institutional contexts (Boughey, 2000). Additionally, the CGS at this university exemplifies this understanding as it seeks to offer writing support, recognising writing as a socially mediated practice rather than an autonomous skill set. Such an approach allows for an elaborate understanding of the writing process, where doctoral students engage with the norms and conventions of their respective disciplines, while recognising the social practices that inform these conventions. By examining the academic writing experiences of non-native speakers who have received support from the CGS through this lens, one potentially gains insight into the multifaceted barriers that doctoral students encounter, and the interventions employed to navigate these challenges.

The sociocultural perspective holds that language is more than a tool for communication but also a form of cultural identity and belonging (Jouini, 2024; Sibanda, J 2021). Hence, academic supervisors, peers, and higher education institutions should take cognisance of the sociocultural identity and context when dealing with doctoral students who take part in a linguistic table not curated for their languages and social practices. Furthermore, the understanding of the sociocultural orientation is that language is a critical resource for the

development of thought (Jeong, Clyburn, Bhatia, McCourt & Lemons, 2022), and this is particularly relevant for non-native English-speaking doctoral students, who may face unique challenges of expression within the constraints of academic writing in English. Understanding academic writing as a social practice enables the recognition of diverse sensibilities and linguistic identities among doctoral students. It brings to the fore the need for inclusive writing support interventions, acknowledging the varying proficiency levels and familiarity with academic conventions that non-native speakers may possess. By embracing linguistic diversity, higher education institutions can create a supportive atmosphere that encourages doctoral students as emerging scholars to express their unique perspectives while also developing their academic writing skills.

For non-native English-speaking students, acquiring academic writing skills in English involves negotiating their linguistic and cultural identities within academic environments where the use of English is enforced. This is significantly more challenging for doctoral students who are assumed to be competent in the English language (Ma, 2021), even though they might need more support than native speakers of English. In most higher education institutions, such support is mainly reserved for undergraduate students, who are presumably the only ones needing such support. Such a negotiation for non-natives often leads to feelings of alienation or inadequacy, more especially when native-speaker standards heavily influence academic norms and expectations. As highlighted by Povolná (2015), the imposition of Anglo-American discourse conventions on international academic communication raises questions about the validity of such standards for non-native English speakers who may possess different rhetorical traditions and communicative styles, especially in a multilingual and multicultural South African context.

Thus, the sociocultural perspective underscores the importance of social interaction in language learning. Vygotsky's theory emphasises the zone of proximal development in which learners benefit from collaborative interactions with more knowledgeable peers or mentors (Yanulis, 1986). In the context of academic writing, non-native English-speaking doctoral students may struggle to find adequate support systems that facilitate their development. For example, Kim, Bindoff, Farrow, McInerney, Borchard and Doherty (2021) found that regardless of the level of study, non-native speakers often lack access to educational opportunities that could enhance their academic writing skills, especially if they come from disadvantaged backgrounds. This lack of access can exacerbate existing inequalities and hinder their academic progress. Furthermore, non-native speakers often perceive a gap between their ideals of effective communication and the realities of academic writing practices, leading to frustration and a lack of motivation, further complicating their writing development (Pelicioni, Michell, Dos Santos & Schulz, 2023).

The sociocultural perspective becomes more relevant to this study as the significance of community and belonging in the academic writing journey are critical components. According to Cahyanti, Hartono and Bharati (2021), non-native English speakers feel isolated in the pedagogic space as they perceive a lack of understanding or support from their academic supervisors and the institution. Furthermore, they point out that language style and communication preferences can vary significantly between native and non-native speakers, which may lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations in academic contexts (Cahyanti et al., 2021). Therefore, the sociocultural perspective is applicable to this study because it provides deeper understanding of the challenges and interventions needed to create proactive inclusive academic communities that recognise and value linguistic diversity. Furthermore, this is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging among non-native speakers and the critical engagement of all scholars in the knowledge-building process.

Methodology

We employed a qualitative approach, and data were collected through three focus groups with a maximum of 10 participants. An ethical clearance certificate (UFS-HSD2024/1456) was obtained from the University's General and Human Research Ethics Committee, granting approval to conduct the study. According to South African regulations, no additional national research permit was required for this study. All participants were provided with the information sheet outlining the details of the study and how the data would be used for research purposes. To ensure anonymity of the participants, their real names or information related to their identities have not been included in the study. Instead, we assigned each participant a pseudonym (for example, Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.). Furthermore, all participants signed consent forms to voluntarily participate in the research study.

To fully understand non-native English-speaking doctoral students' writing experiences, some of the focus group questions were: "What particular difficulties have you encountered in writing academically in English, considering that it is not your primary language?"; "What approaches or methods do you find useful in tackling the difficulties of writing academic papers in English?"; "In what ways does having a different linguistic background give you any specific advantages or disadvantages compared to your

peers who are native English speakers?"; "Could you describe any situations where your first language background had an impact on your academic writing, either positively or negatively?"; "How does your cultural background shape your approach to academic writing tasks?"; and "How have the writing workshops provided by the University of the Free State Centre for Graduate Support impacted your academic writing?" The intention was to gather insight into the writing challenges that doctoral students face when writing in English, the approaches in tackling the writing challenges, the sociocultural aspects influencing the writing process and ways in which the academic writing workshops have assisted with addressing the writing challenges.

The participants were purposively selected from a cohort of students who attended academic writing workshops facilitated by the CGS in 2024. Purposive sampling was a suitable method because it enabled the deliberate selection of participants who met specific criteria (must be a doctoral student, non-native English speaker, and has attended at least five writing workshops), thus guaranteeing pertinent data from the chosen individuals. By specifically targeting non-native English speakers in an English-dominant academic setting, purposive sampling thus enabled relevant and in-depth focus group discussions. The focus groups also enabled the doctoral students to share their academic writing experiences, mainly highlighting the academic writing challenges that they faced and the sociocultural factors that influenced their academic writing practices. This approach facilitated a rich, dynamic exchange of ideas and allowed for the exploration of shared themes and individual perspectives.

The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. The data from the focus groups were analysed using the constant comparative method, which involves coding responses to identify themes and patterns related to the research questions. This method propelled the emergence of insight into the specific challenges faced by non-native English-speaking doctoral students and the sociocultural factors that influence their academic writing. Additionally, the analysis revealed common trends and unique individual experiences, thus presenting a nuanced understanding of the students' writing practices and the contextual barriers they had encountered.

Results and Discussion

Four major themes emerged from the focus group discussions: 1) Linguistic challenges, 2) Supervisor attitude, 3) Language and cultural identity and 4) Institutional support.

Linguistic Challenges

While the data from the study confirm the linguistic challenges highlighted in the literature review, the findings and discussion thereof further make the interplay between language, culture, and academic identity visible. One of the challenges highlighted by the participating non-native English-speaking doctoral students is the issue of sentence construction:

> *For me it was very challenging ... I would construct sentences to my understanding background of Afrikaans and Sesotho like and then presenting it that way. So, I had a lot of challenges, and I grew trying my best and at times, you know I would directly translate the word which makes it difficult for the other reader to understand actually what I wanted to say.* (Participant 6)

This highlights the struggle of translating thoughts from one linguistic framework to another, a common issue for non-native speakers who often rely on their first language's syntactic and grammatical structures. This foretells the frustration that non-native English-speaking doctoral students must experience within a context in which they are expected to fluently communicate their research in a language that does not fully accommodate their linguistic being. The cognitive load, disconnect and frustration are more pronounced in one participant's realisation: "*You think you are saying something, you're saying it in the right way, only to later on realise that, oh, probably this is not standard English, or this is not academic English*" (Participant 7). As a result, students doubt their academic capabilities. These students exist in an environment where language proficiency is associated with academic capabilities. As Gatsheni-Ndlovu (2019) states, the English language is now regarded as knowledge and not a language, and the student's lack of proficiency is then assumed to mean a lack of the expected knowledge. This already diminishes the students' ways of being as they feel inadequate in the academic space.

Furthermore, non-native English-speaking students found that their voice and knowledge diminished. Participant 4 expressed the following: "*You find that you have a lot of ideas or you can bring a topic where we can discuss in my vernacular language ... but now when it comes to putting those ideas in English particularly ... it becomes very difficult*." Another participant shared similar sentiments.

> *Sentence construction, for an example, I am from a Sesotho background ... you want to translate it in English and then you don't have such principles or grammatical principles of English there. The challenge that you are going to do, you are going to try to translate it verbatim word to word to*

> *English and then your sentence becomes long and then as the sentences become long, then your sentences tend to lose the essence of what you want to say.* (Participant 3)

This highlights the students' struggle to convey knowledge and depth of thought in a second language. The ability to engage in worthwhile discussions in one's mother tongue fosters a sense of intellectual confidence that is diminished when transitioning to English. The challenges faced by non-native English-speaking doctoral students in South Africa cannot be understood in isolation from the sociocultural context in which they occur. The continued existence of coloniality, the legacy of apartheid and the subsequent linguistic policies have created a complex landscape where English has remained the language of power and knowledge while indigenous languages remain associated with ignorance, poverty and general lack (Mpofu, 2019; Sibanda, J 2021). This sociolinguistic environment forces non-native speakers to conform to the expectations of academic English, often at the expense of their voice and linguistic and cultural identities. These findings align with broader patterns observed in other emerging economies. For instance, doctoral students in countries such as India, Brazil and Indonesia similarly navigate tension between local linguistic-cultural norms and the expectations of Eurocentric academic writing (Jeyaraj, 2020; Prasetyanti & Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2023). This suggests that the barriers and gaps identified in this South African study are not isolated phenomena but form part of a wider set of systemic challenges in multilingual, English-dominant higher education spaces.

Supervisor Attitude

One critical aspect of the doctoral journey is the supervisor's attitude which influences their feedback, thus significantly impacting on students' confidence and writing development. One of the participants shared a common sentiment among students regarding the expectations set by supervisors. "*As for the process of exchanging my work with my supervisor and giving me comments, it has an impact, sometimes a negative one, because our supervisors, they expect us to express ourselves in a particular manner, depending on the level of our study*" (Participant 8). This statement underscores students' pressure to conform to specific academic standards, which can be daunting for non-native English speakers who tend to struggle with language proficiency. The expectation to express oneself in a "particular manner" can create a sense of anxiety and frustration, especially when doctoral students perceive that their writing does not meet these standards.

Participant 8 further noted that "*sometimes when they see that you're not able to put your points in a manner they expect, some supervisors make comments that depress students*." This highlights the impact of discouraging comments that can be disheartening for non-native speakers already grappling with feelings of inadequacy related to their language skills. It is crucial for supervisors to provide constructive and sensitive feedback in which the challenges faced by non-native speakers are acknowledged as this will foster a supportive academic environment. Likewise, Jeyaraj (2020) observed that Malaysian doctoral students often experienced anxiety and lowered academic confidence when supervisors tended to emphasise language over content. Prasetyanti and Tongpoon-Patanasorn (2023) also found that Indonesian doctoral students faced miscommunication and repeated revisions due to supervisors' expectations rooted in native-English conventions. These parallels suggest that supervisor training and cross-cultural awareness are not just a local necessity but a broader imperative for doctoral education across multilingual academic systems. This challenge was cemented by another participant whose experience with his doctoral proposal revisions illustrates the direct impact of language challenges on the academic writing process.

> *I had to do my proposal three times because of language challenges because my supervisor could read just an introduction or the first part and then he will be saying 'the first paragraph tells me what the proposal is all about' only to find that because of some of those grammatical errors I made, he was unable to grasp what I wanted to say*. (Participant 3)

This reveals the frustration and additional burden that arise when language barriers impede the effective communication of ideas. The necessity of revising a proposal multiple times due to language issues, while expected, can be disheartening and time-consuming, detracting from the student's ability to focus on content development and research. This participant's experience also highlights the critical role of clarity in academic writing. The supervisor's failure to grasp the intended message due to grammatical errors underscores the importance of language proficiency in conveying complex ideas. For non-native speakers, the challenge of mastering academic conventions in English can be overwhelming, particularly when compounded by the pressure to meet the supervisor's expectations. Thus, doctoral supervisors must adopt a more sensitive understanding of non-native speakers' writing difficulties and provide feedback that prioritises depth, clarity and comprehension over strict adherence to language conventions. Input from the supervisor plays a critical role, yet it is often perceived as either insufficient or overwhelming. This aligns with Shamsi and Osam's findings (2024) which indicate insufficient supervisory

feedback as a significant barrier for non-native speakers.

One participant's perspective on the balance between content and language in supervisor feedback is particularly relevant: "*The supervisors must not be strict on the writing or when we submit ... and be more focused on the content rather than penalising you immediately ...*" (Participant 6). This statement reflects students' desire for supervisors to prioritise the substance of students' work over linguistic accuracy in the initial stages of writing. This suggests that students may have valuable ideas and insights that a focus on language errors could overshadow. The call for supervisors to adopt a more supportive approach aligns with the need for a sensitive, growth-oriented feedback culture. By allowing students to express their ideas freely, even if they are not perfectly articulated, supervisors can foster an environment where students feel empowered to engage with their research. The participant's comment that "*... the language part of constructing can come later*" (Participant 6), highlights the importance of recognising that language proficiency is a skill that can be developed over time. A supportive supervisory relationship that encourages exploration and experimentation will improve writing outcomes.

This illustrates tension between the need for linguistic accuracy and the desire for supervisors to focus on content. This creates additional pressure for non-native speakers and their supervisors as they must navigate the complexities of content development and language proficiency. The emphasis on adherence to academic conventions can be particularly challenging for students who feel insecure and frustrated about their writing abilities. This is further exacerbated by supervisors who do not prioritise writing support, making students feel unsupported in their writing endeavours (Rafi & Moghees, 2023). Supervisors sometimes underestimate how much non-native speakers struggle with these academic writing conventions, often leading to misconceptions about their capabilities based solely on language proficiency. This calls for a balanced and supportive approach to feedback that recognises the importance of content and language, providing students with the tools that they need to succeed in their academic writing.

Language and Cultural Identity

By examining non-native English-speaking doctoral students' experiences, one gains insight into how cultural factors and identity impact their academic writing practices. This cultural lens influences how students structure their arguments, present their ideas, and interact with their audience, thus enabling us to understand how societal attitudes relate to students' confidence in their academic writing and presentation of ideas. Participant 6 highlighted the importance of respect in academic writing, thus adding another layer to the discussion: "*From an African perspective, we have that respect. And now how you write, you must bring that respect also in you must also give that reader to say please come again and read my articles*." This notion of respect indicates that it is rooted in some African cultures, where non-native English speakers' knowledge sharing is often accompanied by a sense of humility and acknowledgement of the reader's role in the learning process.

This reflects a cultural understanding of communication that values dialogue and reciprocity. The idea that, "*if you don't bring that respect in your writing, definitely ...*" echoed by Participant 6, suggests that this doctoral student viewed academic writing not merely as a technical skill but as a relational practice that requires sensitivity to the reader's perspective. This cultural lens can influence how some non-native English-speaking students structure their arguments, present their ideas, and interact with their audience. Participant 6's further reflection on her family's educational background illustrates her pressure to uphold familial expectations in her academic pursuits: "*Then I say my family is educated. Why should I just drop here and we were very small, but the family tree is very large.*" This further reveals the weight of cultural heritage and familial pride that can motivate students to excel in their academic writing while also highlighting the potential for cultural expectations to create additional complexities in academic writing.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the approach to academic writing for non-native English students is located in their communal and cultural contexts – an aspect rarely considered and accommodated in the pedagogic space. Participant 1's assertion that "*my writing tends to reflect more of my surroundings than, you know, the world*", emphasises the localised nature of their writing experience. This reflection suggests that non-native English-speaking students may draw heavily from their cultural contexts and identities when articulating their ideas, which creates challenges in meeting academic standards that favour a more globalised or standardised form of academic expressivity. This further reinforces the idea that academic writing cannot be separated from the cultural identities of the writers or be treated as a mere technical skill for non-native speakers of the language. Another student's reflection on the significance of culture in his academic writing tasks suggests that cultural identity is not merely a backdrop but an active component of the writing process: "[c]*ulture has played a very significant role in my academic writing tasks*" (Participant 4). This perspective

challenges the notion that academic writing is a neutral or universal skill, positing that it is deeply intertwined with the writer's cultural experiences and identities. By recognising the role of cultural attitudes, respect and social backgrounds in shaping academic writing, supervisors and writing support centres can better support non-native speakers in navigating the complexities of academic discourse.

Institutional Support

We also focused on the availability and effectiveness of institutional support systems. The findings highlight mixed experiences with writing centres and mentorship programmes and feelings of being overwhelmed by academic expectations. The findings underscore the need for structured, comprehensive and tailored support systems to address the unique struggles of non-native speakers in academic writing.

Evidently, the participants also mentioned the availability and effectiveness of institutional support systems. "*The more you speak English on a daily basis, the more you read about it, you learn a lot. I have been assisted by the Centre for Graduate Support workshops to improve*" (Participant 8). This remark underscores the positive impact of institutional resources, such as postgraduate student workshops, in enhancing students' language skills and academic writing abilities. Daily practice and reading suggests that immersion in the English language is crucial for improvement, reinforcing the idea that consistent engagement with the language leads to improved proficiency.

Participant 7 reflected on their undergraduate experience: "*In my undergraduate back home, we had what they call a communication skills course. Their focus was mainly to assist students to be better writers considering that English is not our first language.*" This reflects the importance of foundational courses that specifically address writing skills for non-native speakers. Acknowledging English as a second language indicates recognising the unique challenges that these students face and the necessity of targeted support.

Participants broadly appreciated the role of institutional resources like workshops and language support centres in addressing their academic writing challenges. However, the sufficiency of these resources varied among individuals, as some felt that additional efforts were required to translate skills into practical improvement. While feedback suggests that institutional support is critical, it may not always be tailored to meet the diverse needs of non-native speakers, highlighting the importance of ongoing assessment and adaptation of support programmes.

The participants had varied experiences of writing centres and mentorship programmes. Participant 4 noted that "*the workshops started shaping us and giving us a clear picture of how academic writing is supposed to be. So far, I wouldn't say I'm there, but the support is helping.*" This reflects a positive perception of the support workshops, indicating that they provide valuable guidance in understanding academic writing conventions. The acknowledgement that participants are still in the process of improvement suggests that these workshops play a supportive role in their development.

Conversely, Participant 3 expressed dissatisfaction: "*Sometimes I feel like workshops are too general and don't address specific doctoral-level needs of non-native English-speaking students. I still have to figure out many things on my own.*" This highlights a critical gap in the support provided to doctoral students who require more specialised and structured training in academic writing. The sentiment of navigating challenges independently underscores the need for tailored support that aligns with the specific demands of doctoral-level writing.

While some participants praised writing workshops for improving their skills, others expressed dissatisfaction due to the generic nature of the sessions. This indicates a need for more tailored and specialised support programmes, particularly for non-native English-speaking doctoral students dealing with advanced academic writing. Participant 2 stated as follows: "*I think institutions should focus on providing writing workshops tailored to students' levels and mentorship opportunities to guide us through the process*." This statement reflects a desire for more personalised support and mentorship opportunities that consider the varying proficiency levels among students.

The analysis shows the complex landscape of academic writing challenges faced by non-native English-speaking doctoral students at the university. While institutional support systems, writing workshops, and mentorship programmes play a vital role in addressing these challenges, there is a clear need for more tailored and comprehensive support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With this study we highlighted the importance of understanding academic writing challenges through a sociocultural lens, which provides insight into the complex interplay between language proficiency, cultural identity, and academic expectations. Linguistic challenges are pervasive and remain a significant barrier for non-native English-speaking doctoral students, as noted through the participants' difficulties with grammar, vocabulary, and adherence to academic writing conventions. As such, institutions should prioritise language support programmes that focus on developing specific writing skills necessary for academic success,

thereby addressing the unique needs of non-native speakers.

Supervisors' attitudes and feedback practices also further exacerbate doctoral students' frustration with academic writing. The participants' remarks illuminate the impact of supervisors' attitudes which lower the students' self-esteem and confidence in their writing. Although students must conform to academic writing conventions, there is need for supervisors to be adequately trained on how to positively deliver feedback in a manner that fosters students' confidence. Furthermore, supervisors should be trained and equipped with skills on the development of doctoral writing. This could be in the form of professional development programmes that offer supervision training on constructive feedback practices, and how to support postgraduate students' academic writing practices.

Language and cultural identity influence writing practices and play a crucial role in shaping the academic writing experiences of non-native English speakers. Participants expressed concerns about conforming to Western academic norms, which often conflicted with their native writing conventions. Understandably, assessors for doctoral theses are often international examiners, which places more pressure on doctoral students to deliver texts in fluent academic English. However, institutions must recognise the value of diverse writing styles and encourage students to maintain their cultural identities while engaging with English academic writing. This approach can foster a more inclusive academic environment that respects linguistic diversity.

Institutional support is crucial, therefore, its availability and effectiveness emerged as a critical theme in the analysis. Institutions need to develop comprehensive support systems tailored to the unique challenges faced by non-native speakers. This includes enhancing services at writing centres, providing targeted workshops, and fostering mentorship opportunities that address the specific needs of non-native doctoral students. There is a need to implement intensive doctoral writing programmes to enhance and strengthen non-native English-speaking doctoral students' academic writing skills. Rigorous institutional support will ensure a less frustrating doctoral journey, more especially for non-native English-speaking doctoral students. Rafi and Moghees (2023) and Shamsi and Osam (2022) report similar writing challenges experienced by non-native English-speaking doctoral students from other developing contexts. Such global consistencies reinforce the targeted writing support strategies advocated in this study. Specialised workshops and writing groups may well be applicable in other multilingual, English-centric doctoral programmes.

To conclude, there is a need for future research on comparative studies on institutional support across various institutions to gain insight into the similarities or differences of doctoral students' academic writing experiences. This will offer further insight into the various support systems and the impact thereof, implemented by other institutions.

Authors' Contributions

PM wrote the introduction, methodology, conclusion and recommendations. BS wrote the abstract, literature review, theoretical framework, results and findings. Both authors contributed to the compilation of the reference list and reviewed and refined the final manuscript.

Notes

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