

Establishing Thesis Writing Workshops for Postgraduate Research Students

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Abstract

This paper will review a project which aimed to devise workshops to improve the quality of writing in research students' theses. The project was undertaken in response to concerns expressed by the School of Research Studies at the University of Hong Kong. It was felt that many students lack the writing skills necessary to produce a satisfactory thesis. Investigations showed that little research had been done into the writing difficulties of students at postgraduate level. Therefore, the project began with a needs analysis to establish problem areas that needed to be addressed. The analysis resulted in the development of a diagnostic instrument which became the designing principle for a series of workshops intended to enhance the quality of postgraduate student writing. In the paper we will briefly describe the outcome of the needs analysis and the resulting diagnostic instrument before focusing on the workshops themselves and how they developed over several series in line with student evaluations and feedback.

Aims of the Project

This project was designed to complement research that was already being undertaken at the University of Hong Kong into the writing needs and difficulties of postgraduate research students. The project's specific aim was to set up a series of needs-based, interactive, structured workshops to enhance the quality of theses being written by postgraduate (M.Phil and PhD) students in English.

Project Background

In October 1992, the Committee on Higher Degrees at the University of Hong Kong expressed regret and concern about the unsatisfactory standard of English in M.Phil and doctoral theses produced by students in the university. This concern reflects a growing international awareness that postgraduate students are not automatically able to produce a level of English consistent with that expected in a doctoral thesis, merely by virtue of their evident academic ability in their own field. This problem has been acknowledged even amongst students writing in English as their first language (e.g., Brown, 1994; DEET, 1988; Dunkerley and Weeks, 1994). It is only reasonable to assume that this problem will be magnified for students writing in English as a second or foreign language. These writing difficulties may indeed be compounded in an institution such as the University of Hong Kong, where, although students are studying through the medium of English, they are in a non-English speaking culture and frequently have supervisors who are themselves operating in English as a second or foreign language. Many of these supervisors do not feel confident dealing with their students' language problems and would like additional assistance to be offered to students by those who have language teaching expertise. It was in order to be able to offer this additional assistance that the English Centre at the University of Hong Kong undertook the investigation which is the focus of this project. The intention was to discover the type of writing workshops that would best provide assistance for those

postgraduate research students who lack the language skills to produce a satisfactory level of English in their theses.

Data Collection

In order to provide a basis for the foundation of the writing workshops, data was collected from two sources: a needs analysis and samples of student writing.

Needs Analysis

A needs analysis was carried out in December 1994 by means of a questionnaire sent to the approximately 1200 students registered for M.Phil and PhD degrees at that time. The questionnaire consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. A total of 362 questionnaires were returned, which gives a response rate of approximately 30%. In addition to demographic information, the questionnaire sought to find out the language background of the students, their experiences and difficulties in using English in academic writing and the students' perceptions of their own writing proficiency and needs. The students were asked to rate themselves on a four-point scale, from 'extreme' to 'none', to indicate what they considered to be their level of difficulty with various given aspects of thesis writing. They were also asked to comment on difficulties they had experienced with any aspects of writing in their higher degree studies and to note any problems that their supervisors had pointed out to them.

Demographic Information

It can be seen from the table below (Figure 1) that the majority of respondents (59.9%) were in their first or second year of study.

Figure 1: Distribution of Students by Year of Study

	1st.	2nd.	3rd.	4th.	5th.	Total
M.Phil	72	58	34	13	1	178
PhD	49	38	46	27	10	170
Total	121	96	80	40	11	348

Missing observations: 1 PhD; 3 M.Phil

Approximately 45 different departments were represented, covering all nine faculties at the University. There may, in fact, have been students from yet more departments, but a few respondents stated only their faculty.

Responses were almost equally divided between M.Phil students (178) and PhD students (170), although it is quite possible that a considerable number of those registered at the time for an M.Phil would eventually upgrade to a PhD.

Male students outnumbered females by almost 2 to 1 (237:125).

A large percentage (63%) of students were over the age of 25. Even amongst the first year postgraduates the figure was 61%, which suggests that many students do not enter postgraduate studies immediately after graduating from their first degree, but are returning after several years of working. It is also worth noting that 97% of those students whose first language was Putonghua were in the over-25 group, as opposed to only 51% of the Cantonese speakers.

Language Background

The first language of by far the majority of students was Cantonese, but other first languages were represented. The breakdown by first language is shown below:

Cantonese:	68.6%	English:	14.3%
Putonghua:	12%	Other:	5%

It should perhaps be noted that 20.8% of the first year students were Putonghua speakers as opposed to 61.6% Cantonese speakers, whereas only 8.75% of the third year students were Putonghua speakers against 73.7% Cantonese speakers. These figures seem to suggest that the number of students from the PRC who are registering for higher degrees at the University is gradually increasing.

Overall, 85.8% of the students had received their previous university education in English, but only 20% of the 43 Putonghua speakers were in this group by comparison to 96% of the Cantonese speakers. It should also be noted that 33% of students in their first year of research studies had not been educated in English at university as opposed to only 4% of those in their third year. This suggests that the proportion of students experiencing difficulties in writing in English is likely to grow in future.

In response to a question on students' perceived difficulties in using English for written communication, 26% of the respondents acknowledged experiencing *serious* difficulties. This overall figure seems quite low but it should be remembered that roughly 34% of the students were in their first year of studies and may not, therefore, have yet begun to write anything. It is also, of course, not possible to say how each student interpreted 'serious' in this question. It must also be noted that the figure for Putonghua speakers was double the overall figure (51%).

Respondents were asked whether they had sought assistance with written English. Of the 31.2% who had sought such assistance, 21% had Putonghua as their first language. This represents 58% of the total number of Putonghua speakers. It is clear from these figures that many of the students from the PRC are aware of their problems and are actively seeking advice.

Of those who had sought assistance, approximately half had done so from their supervisor; the remaining half had sought help elsewhere, including a very small number who had been to the English Centre to seek help from language experts.

Student Perceptions of Their Own Writing Ability

Figure 2 below shows how the students rated their own English writing ability on a 5-point-scale from 1 (very severe writing difficulties) to 5 (no writing difficulties).

Figure 2: Self Rating in Terms of Difficulty Shown in Percentage of Students

Degree	Difficulty Rating					Total (N = 361)
	1 (severe)	2	3	4	5 (no)	
M.Phil	0.8	4.7	21.3	17.5	6.1	50.4
PhD	0.6	1.9	17.7	18.0	11.4	49.6
Total	1.4	6.6	39.0	35.5	17.5	100

Missing observations: 1

It can be seen that only 17.5% of the respondents rated themselves as having no writing difficulties, while 47.1% rated themselves as having moderate to severe difficulties (i.e., rated themselves between 1 and 3 on the rating scale). This finding that a significant minority of those students registered for a research degree, particularly those educated through the medium of Putonghua, encounter serious difficulties with their writing is supported by findings from a related research project in which supervisors were interviewed (see Cooley and Lewkowicz, 1995a, 1995b).

Students perceived themselves to have difficulties with several aspects of thesis writing, the most notable being 'getting started': 30% of the students stated that they had moderate difficulties in this area, while 31% acknowledged considerable to extreme difficulties. Numerous other problems were mentioned by students with areas related to organisation of ideas, style, putting ideas into words and focusing on essentials predominating. Editing was seen as a relatively minor problem.

According to the students, supervisors' comments on their writing concentrated on aspects very similar to those perceived by the students as areas of difficulty. Comments on 'poor coherence' (*organisation of ideas*), 'inappropriate and informal vocabulary' (*style*) and 'irrelevant material' (*focusing on essentials*) were the most frequently mentioned. The nature of the cause and effect relationship here is, naturally, in question: did the supervisors' comments lead to the students' awareness of the problems or were they occasioned by already acknowledged problems? Only a very small number of students (21 out of the total 362) noted difficulties in making the corrections suggested by supervisors and some of these difficulties were related to differences of opinion rather to language problems.

Students' Perceptions of Their Writing Needs

Of the 96 students who responded to a question on what should be covered in the workshops that were then being planned, 12 gave answers which had to be discarded as being irrelevant, too vague or lacking in clear meaning. Of the remaining 84 respondents, 42.8% thought courses should cover style and expression, 40.4% organisation, 16.6% grammar and 14.4% referencing and writing the literature review.

Student Writing Samples

Further data for the content of the writing workshops came from 17 samples of students' writing. Six of these samples were parts of students' dissertations that had been submitted to the English Centre's postgraduate students' Writing Support Service for analysis and the remaining 11 texts were from students in the Core Competencies Programme which was being conducted at that time by the School of Research Studies at the University of Hong Kong. These 11 texts varied in length from 2-15 pages, with an average of around 6 pages. The samples were, in most cases, related to the students' studies but were not necessarily extracts from their dissertations and varied in text type from research proposals to literature reviews to conference papers. It was considered essential to look at extended samples of student writing related to their research area rather than short assigned texts on a general topic as the latter would not show whether or not the students had mastered the morphological and discursal features characteristic of an academic dissertation, which are not evident in non-academic discourse.

After analysing and discussing these samples of work, it became apparent that the writing problems were both at the macro and micro level. The four main areas identified were: overall communication, substantiation, discourse elements and editing.

1 Under problems with *overall communication* we noted:

unclear statement of purpose; lack of audience awareness; poor organisation; inconsistency of argument; inappropriate weighting of points.

2 Problems with *substantiation* were apparent from:

inadequate indication of stance towards source materials; inappropriate expression of attitude towards own research claims; unclear acknowledgment of other researchers' work.

3 *Discourse elements* which caused difficulties were:

inadequate/misleading signalling of the overall structure of the writing; poor paragraph development; incorrect grammatical choices; inappropriate use of vocabulary.

4 At the more mechanical level of writing, problems arose mainly from poor proofreading; lack of attention to *editing* of work.

Of these four areas, it was found that the major and most frequent problems were at the macro level of overall communication; it was quite possible for a student to be fairly competent at the morphosyntactic level and yet be unsuccessful at the level of discourse in an academic context. This is not to say that problems at the sentence and paragraph level are unimportant, but we found they did not interfere with the reader's comprehension of the overall purpose of the writing in the same way as other features, such as poor organisation and inconsistent arguments.

This empirical analysis of the students' problems demonstrated that the students' own perceptions of their writing difficulties were, indeed, quite accurate, the main problem areas being with correctly expressing and organising ideas rather than with grammatical details.

The Writing Workshops

The Designing Principle

The data collected from the needs analysis and the student samples were combined with data from a related research project examining the writing proficiency of postgraduate students at HKU (see Cooley and Lewkowicz, forthcoming) and led to the development of a student profiling document, the Diagnostic Assessment Profile (DAP). The purpose of the Profile is, as its name suggests, to provide a profile, or outline, of a student's strengths and weaknesses by highlighting for the student which features of the dissertation genre appear to have been mastered and which still need attention. The framework is also designed to raise learners' awareness of the language manipulation skills needed to successfully produce the type of text that will gain them admission to their desired academic community.

The Profile is divided into four major sections: overall communicative success, substantiation, discourse features and editing. Each section is further divided into sub-sections dealing with areas such as audience, topic development and use of sources (see Allison et al, forthcoming). These categories were chosen to correspond with areas of difficulty identified by the needs analysis and the investigation of student writing samples.

This Profile was also used for designing the content of the structured writing workshops which this action learning project set out to establish in order to enhance the quality of research thesis writing in the university. The rationale behind this choice was that those areas which had been identified as causing the greatest problems for thesis writers should be the areas covered in workshops for those writers. Accordingly, a series of five workshops was run covering all the topics in the four major sections of the DAP. These, however, concentrated on the macro level features which contribute to the overall communicative success of a piece of writing and placed less emphasis on micro level features, such as punctuation, which can always be corrected by careful proofreading.

The Initial Series

The initial series of workshops, for which 105 students from a wide variety of disciplines were registered, took place over a four-month period. Each three-hour workshop began with an approximately one-hour lecture for the whole group. After a short break the large group split into tutorial groups of around 16 students for a one and a half hour session. The intention was that each tutorial group should discuss writing that the students had brought with them, focusing on how successful their writing was in terms of what had been covered in the preceding lecture. It was believed that in this way the students would be able to help each other by suggesting improvements for future drafts, and this would help to reduce the sense of isolation felt by many research students. It was, in fact, because of the plan for students to work on samples of their own writing that the workshops were spread out over such a long period. The idea was that by spacing out the workshops students would have ample time between sessions to digest what had been covered in the lecture element of the previous workshop and would be able to use this information along with peer and tutor feedback to redraft earlier versions of their writing. It was also thought that, by working on the writing that they were already doing, students would not be burdened by additional writing tasks that they may well consider to be irrelevant to their current needs.

Reflections and Changes

Student feedback at the end of the first series of workshops was generally positive, but there were some evident problems which led to a number of major changes in the second and subsequent series.

Spacing

One of the major causes of concern over the initial series was the extremely high attrition rate; the number of students dropped from 105 in the first workshop to just 21 in the fifth. Responses to a questionnaire sent to those students who did not complete the course suggested that the spacing of the workshops was the prime cause of non-completion. Respondents said they found it difficult to commit themselves to specific dates so far in advance and they often found themselves unable to attend a workshop when their plans changed unexpectedly. Later workshops run in a more intensive mode (once a week, twice a week or on consecutive days) showed very low attrition rates of between 4% and 17%. This seems to suggest that for this type of awareness-raising programme the intensive mode is preferable.

Provision of Texts for Discussion

Another problem which became evident early in the initial series was the lack of writing samples brought by the students for discussion in the tutorial sessions. Many of the students who attended were at an early stage of their research and had, therefore, not written anything to bring for discussion. Many of those who had written something were reluctant to share their writing with other students, possibly due to lack of confidence or concerns about the confidentiality of their research. This situation resulted in the necessity for the tutors to provide material for discussion. When this was done tutorial sessions were much more successful; the common core of materials, either extracts from students' writing or from published journal articles, allowed for more productive discussion and exposed students to a range of texts illustrating the points raised in the input sessions. All subsequent series of workshops have used a common-core of materials.

Numbers of Students

A further change which was made after the initial series related to the number of participants in the workshops. With the 105 students in the original group it was felt necessary to adopt a lecture format for the input session rather than have seven parallel lessons, particularly as several of the teachers involved in the tutorial sessions had not been involved in the original research into the thesis writing problems. However, the consequent lack of immediate interaction on points covered weakened the impact of the discussions which followed. Later series have limited the number of participants to 36 and these classes are taught by two teachers using a team-teaching approach.

Current Format

The workshops have now been extended to 18 hours as both teachers and students suggested that participants would benefit from more discussion time on some of the tasks and an extra unit has been added on raising awareness of the importance of avoiding plagiarism. The workshops, which are interdisciplinary, are run in six three-hour sessions each divided into two sections. After an initial brief input session by a teacher, students divide into small groups to work on tasks based on the writing samples provided. The small groups then report their ideas back to the whole group. This pattern is repeated two or three times during each three-hour period. The team-teaching approach that has been adopted seems to be valued by both the teachers and the students. The former seem to feel that the presence of a colleague allows for more interaction between teachers and students during the small group discussions, while the latter enjoy the opportunity of having input from more than one source.

The Future?

The project team is preparing the materials used in the workshops for publication as a textbook and a teachers' guide. In this way the practical results of this project will be made more widely available to postgraduate students who are struggling with the difficulty of producing a research thesis in English and to those language teachers who are trying to assist them.

Some consideration is also being given to providing faculty/discipline-specific workshops. The original decision not to do so was based on the finding that the same type of writing problems seem to be common across disciplines. End of course evaluations do, however, suggest that the science students, although reacting positively to the workshops, appear to find the objectives less relevant to their own writing than students in the other faculties. The reasons for this are not readily apparent from the other responses on the evaluation forms and clearly further research into this area is necessary. Discipline specific courses could cater more precisely for the needs of students in that discipline as all the writing samples would be taken from the one field, which may make participation in the small group discussions easier for some students. However, the number of research students in one discipline who are all ready at the same time to take a thesis writing course is generally quite small and running a course for them would probably not be cost effective (a practical consideration which is of no small importance). Faculty-specific courses may be the answer to this problem in terms of numbers, but it is questionable whether these would really be more beneficial than the present comprehensive workshops as students within a faculty often have no more in common in terms of subject matter than students from different faculties; a civil engineer and an electrical engineer may, for example, have less in common than a civil engineer and an architect. This problem remains to be addressed.

Project Evaluation

Given the nature of this project and its long-term goals, it is not possible for the researchers to assess the ultimate success of the workshops in real terms as their value will only be apparent to those directly involved in the thesis writing process, that is, the students, their supervisors and their examiners. However, informal feedback from supervisors and the positive evaluations from the students suggest that the workshops have been of value in improving students' awareness of good thesis writing practices. Students almost unfailingly indicate that they would recommend the workshops to other research students and evidence from students numbers seems to suggest that they do, in fact, do so. At the time of writing, six series of workshops have been conducted and although the workshops remain voluntary, the waiting lists are generally more than double the maximum number of participants. The workshops have become a regular feature of the postgraduate programme at the university and this, in itself, could be said to provide a positive evaluation of the project.