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English academic writing proficiency in higher education: Facilitating the transition from metalinguistic awareness to metalinguistic competence.

Abstract

Students entering higher education are expected to develop into proficient academic writers in the course of their studies. This article focuses on metalinguistic awareness in the development of English (L2) academic writing proficiency in higher education. It builds on an on-going study investigating the role of metacognitive skills in the development of L2 academic writing proficiency in higher education. It bases its findings on an initial questionnaire which aimed at clarifying the students' understanding of "an academic text" and "academic writing" in English, and how well they felt they mastered L2 academic writing. The article sheds light on the extent to which metalinguistic awareness of L2 academic vocabulary and language is present in the students' thoughts about L2 academic writing as expressed in their responses to the questionnaire, and discusses the findings and their implications for how to further facilitate students' development of L2 academic writing proficiency. The analysis reveals that the students possess elements of metalinguistic awareness about L2 academic writing, but that their awareness is limited, particularly in relation to practical use of academic vocabulary. The results also indicate that the students lack the metalinguistic competence necessary to put their awareness into practice. The study concludes that raising students' metalinguistic awareness is necessary to facilitate their further development in L2 academic writing proficiency. It argues that metalinguistic conversations can be an important tool in this process, and emphasizes that greater focus on such conversations as facilitators of L2 academic writing proficiency is needed within L2 higher education.

Introduction

For students, entering the territory of higher education involves acculturation into a discourse characterized by new and unfamiliar social, cultural, and academic conventions. This process of academic socialization "involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting, and organizing knowledge" (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 32). To Norwegian students of

English (L2), this process is particularly challenging because the adaptation process involves understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge in a second language.

Particularly important in this process of acculturation is learning to express oneself in accordance with conventions which are both expected and valued within academia (Ivanič, 2004, p. 233). In a sphere where knowledge is largely consolidated through writing, mastering the written forms of expression is a key to success and consequently a skill which receives a great deal of attention from the students. Acquiring academic writing proficiency entails not only mastering the technical and formal aspects of the genre, such as using source references and citations, but also the ability to think in more abstract terms, such as reflecting critically on vocabulary choice and language usage within the academic context. This ability to engage cognitively in one's own thought processes – to "think about thinking" – is referred to as metacognition. Finally, acquiring academic writing proficiency involves mastering the often tacit conventions of academic writing. The tacit nature of such conventions makes them particularly difficult to grasp for students; at the same time, mastering them is the ultimate emblem of success and a prerequisite for membership in the academic discourse.

In the context of L2 academic writing in higher education, recent studies on the role of metacognition in the development of L2 academic writing proficiency show that students' metacognitive skills are limited to mastering the technical aspects of academic writing, while they struggle with mastering the more abstract and cognitively demanding processes involved in the activity (Mirador 2011; Negretti & Kuteeva 2011). While similar studies on L2 academic writing proficiency have not been carried out within the Norwegian context, a study by Hellekjær (2005) is relevant here because it sheds light on a competence closely related to writing; namely, reading. In his study, Hellekjær looked at the English reading proficiency of Norwegian secondary school students and its implications for the transition from secondary to higher education. He found that upon graduation, possibly as many as two thirds of the students in his study did not possess the skills necessary to read textbooks in higher education, and that the reading problems persisted into university level, although to a slightly lesser extent (Hellekjær, 2005, p. 232). Furthermore, he found that for about a third of the university level students in the study, the problem was poor English linguistic proficiency in general, rather than poor reading skills in particular (Hellekjær, 2005, p. 239). This indicates that the challenges students entering higher education face go beyond reading in English and might include other skills, such as writing in English. This is particularly relevant to this study because it raises the question whether similar findings might surface when investigating the English academic writing proficiency of beginner students in higher education; whether Hellekjær's main conclusion, that many Norwegian students do not possess adequate English reading

proficiency upon entering higher education, will be mirrored when it comes to English academic writing proficiency.

The focus of this article is on the development of Norwegian students' metalinguistic awareness in L2 academic writing. This article builds on an on-going longitudinal project which investigates the role of metacognitive skills in the development of L2 writing academic proficiency in higher education, and bases its findings on a questionnaire filled out by the students at the beginning of the project. Its aim was to clarify what the students understood by the terms "an academic text" and "academic writing" in English, and how well they perceived themselves as mastering L2 academic writing at that early stage in their English studies. The main purpose of the article is to shed light on the extent to which metalinguistic awareness of L2 academic vocabulary and language is present in the students' thoughts about L2 academic writing, as expressed in their responses to the questionnaire. In addition, the article discusses the implications of the findings for how to facilitate further development of students' English academic writing proficiency in higher education.

Theoretical framework

Viewing the act of writing as social practice implies viewing writing as a meaning-making activity rooted in the cultural and social contexts in which it occurs (Cremin & Myhill 2012; Ivanič 2004). Within these contexts, people learn to write "implicitly by participating in socially situated literacy events which fulfill social goals which are relevant and meaningful to them" (Ivanič, 2004, p. 235). Consequently, learning to write takes place within "communities of practice" in which people learn through apprenticeship (Wenger, 1998). They participate in the social practices characteristic of the community and increasingly come to "identify themselves with the values, beliefs, goals and activities of those who engage in those practices" (Ivanič, 2004, p. 235). In this context, learning to write involves mastering not only the explicit knowledge but also the tacit conventions of the discourse community (Ivanič 1998; Wenger 1998), many of which are not always articulated but rather have the form of unwritten norms and expectations regarding how to share and present discoursal knowledge. The challenge facing the novice writer, then, is to grasp and make sense of the tacit conventions necessary to be initiated into the discourse community.

However, learning to write also involves the ability to reflect upon and talk about one's own writing. In other words, it involves the learner's active engagement in her thinking and writing processes on a metacognitive level. Thus, writing is a highly sophisticated activity which involves the "active control over cognitive processes engaged in learning" (Hattie, 2010, p.188), enabling the learners "to become more aware of their own thinking and learning

processes, and so to have some influence on them" (Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p. 100). In the context of academic writing, such metacognitive reflection goes beyond mere information processing, as it involves transforming and reprocessing information. Writing then becomes a conscious activity which engages the writer in "a two way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and continuously developing text" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987, p. 12).

Metalinguistic awareness, a subcategory of metacognition that relates to knowledge about language, is also an important aspect of writing. Metalinguistic awareness can be understood as "thinking about language" and relates to the learner's ability to think about language and text as a phenomenon. It is about "looking at words, and sentences and text" (Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p. 102), and actively engage in the writing process by reflecting critically on the various writing choices available, and make decisions based on those reflections. Through such active engagement, the writer gains conscious control over the various discoursal choices involved in the writing process (Carter, cited in Wilson & Myhill, 2012, p. 555), and the implications of those choices.

Acquiring such conscious control necessitates having a language for reflecting upon the various choices involved in the writing process, and "how they are working in the text" (Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p. 102). Consequently, a metalanguage facilitates metalinguistic reflection on and awareness of the various aspects of the writing process. In the context of higher education, where the discourses represent "constellations of beliefs about writing, beliefs about learning to write, ways of talking about writing" (Ivanič, 2004, p. 224), having a metalanguage for talking about L2 academic writing practices becomes particularly important as it contributes to making the tacit conventions of L2 academic writing explicit to the students.

Previous research

Research on the various metacognitive skills involved in developing L2 academic writing proficiency is limited, and this is therefore an area where more work is needed. However, recent research on the topic confirms that metacognitive skills such as critical thinking and abstract reflection are important to develop the higher order thinking skills required and expected within higher education (Granville & Dison 2005; Negretti 2012). A study involving first year non-English speaking students at a South African university found that the students' reflections on their course work, in combination with meta-level questions posed by the tutors, promoted the students' learning, as it developed their "awareness and evaluative thinking" (Granville & Dison, 2005, p. 108). The study concludes that such reflective processes contribute to the "development of higher order thinking" skills in the students (Granville &

Dison, 2005, p. 119). Research on the role of metacognitive skills in the development of L1 academic proficiency draws similar conclusions. An American study examining the role of metacognition in students' writing choices found that the ability for abstract reflection helped "students know how to adapt their strategic choices to the specific requirements of the task and why" (Negretti, 2012, p. 170). In their study, Granville and Dison (2005) also found clear indications that students' reflection on the learning process promoted their acquisition of L2 subject-specific language and concepts (p. 109). Thus, reflection can be seen as "a means of mediating the combined development of higher order thinking and a specialized language" (Granville & Dison, 2005, p. 110).

Recent research on metacognition and L2 academic writing proficiency also shows that students generally associate academic writing with skills-based improvement rather than development of metacognitive skills such as critical thinking and abstract reflection (Mirador 2011; Negretti & Kuteeva 2011). In other words, student focus tends to be on mastering the genre-specific aspects rather than on developing content through critical reflection and discussion. This is confirmed in a study by Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) on fostering metacognitive L2 genre awareness in pre-service teachers, which found that while all the students developed metacognitive awareness of genre-relevant concepts important to academic writing, "only a few showed the metacognitive ability to apply these notions in different ways for different texts" (p. 103). The study concludes that "L2 learners must develop an ability to apply their knowledge of genre-relevant concepts to analyze academic texts as 'situated' in the immediate communicative context" (Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011, p. 107). These findings are mirrored in a Chinese study which found that the majority of the students understood the main purpose behind academic essay writing to be improvement of their English in general, and their L2 academic writing skills in particular (Mirador, 2011, p. 179). In contrast, only a very few students saw the development of critical thinking skills and acquisition of knowledge as main reasons for writing essays (Mirador, 2011, p. 174).

The amount of research on the role of metalinguistic awareness and metalanguage in L2 academic language development is also limited. However, a study by Schleppegrell (2013) concludes that talking about language in a meaningful manner in L2 language teaching contexts contributes to developing students' L2 academic language proficiency and metalinguistic awareness because it helps students develop new understandings about language, enabling them "to abstract from particular language use" and "consider the linguistic choices they have in participating in different tasks and contexts" (p. 166).

The above research represents important contributions to different aspects within the field of metacognition and academic writing proficiency. However, the limited amount of research on the role of the various metacognitive skills in the development of L2 academic writing proficiency reveals a gap in this

particular field of research, and points to an area which merits further attention. In this context, my study is a contribution to a field of research where much work remains to be done.

Methodology

Project presentation
The study discussed here is part of an on-going, small-scale, longitudinal project which investigates the role of metacognitive skills in the development of L2 writing academic proficiency in higher education. Here, metacognition is understood as the student's ability to reflect critically on her own thought processes and the discoursal choices she makes in the writing process. The project comprises two research questions, which are formulated as follows:

- What, if any, metacognitive skills can be observed in students' use of reflection journals?
- How might the use of such journals contribute to improving their L2 academic writing proficiency?

The project runs over four semesters and consists of three separate parts. In addition to the initial questionnaire, the project consists of a series of student reflection journals which are collected over the course of the research period, and a final questionnaire. The students' reflection journals comprise the main body of research material. The students write these in connection with obligatory text assignments in the course, all of which are to be written as academic texts. In the course of the project, each student can write and submit a maximum of 12 reflection journals; however, since writing them is voluntary, it is very likely that the number of journals per student will vary. After the students have submitted their assignments for revision, but before they have received tutor feedback, the students are asked to reflect on their experience with writing the assignment. In their reflections, the students are encouraged to write about any aspect of the writing process which they found challenging, or troublesome, or interesting in any way. They are not given any other instructions in terms of content, structure or style. The reflection journals are then submitted to the tutor, who responds to their reflections in the form of questions in an effort to prompt further reflection on the students' part.

The final questionnaire, which the participants will fill out at the end of the project's fourth and final semester, will contain many of the same questions as the initial questionnaire. First of all, this is done in an effort to detect whether the students' reflections, combined with meta-level questions posed by the tutor, have contributed to the students' further developing their understanding of the concepts "academic text" and "academic writing" in English. Secondly, many of

the same questions are used in an effort to find out whether the students feel they master L2 academic writing and its various components at a higher level by the end of the project than they did at the outset. Finally, the questionnaire will ask the students about their experience with reflecting on their academic writing. This is done in an effort to identify elements of meta-level reflection in the students' thoughts relating to L2 academic writing.

Research context

The integrated teacher education program launched in 2010 (Grunnskole-lærerutdanning, "GLU") gives students wanting to become teachers the option of two different paths; one program for primary teacher education (GLU 1-7) and one program for upper primary/lower secondary teacher education (GLU 5-10). In both education programs, English is an elective subject, starting in the first year of study. The students choosing GLU1-7 will have English for two years with the option of a third year, while the students choosing GLU5-10 will have English for three years. Students in GLU1-7 earn 30 ECTs, while students in GLU5-10 earn 60 ECTs upon completion of the course.

Participants

The project follows 18 student teachers studying English at a Norwegian teacher education college. All 18 participants are ethnic Norwegians, and have Norwegian as their L1. They are all in the 5-10 program, studying to become teachers in upper primary and lower secondary school. These students chose English as their elective subject prior to starting their studies, and will have English as a subject for three years. At the outset of the project the students were in their second year of teacher education, and also in their second year of studying English. However, they had not performed any academic writing in the first year of English studies.

Research design

The content and purpose of the project was presented to the students about a month before it was scheduled to start. All 18 volunteered to participate in the project, and to fill out the initial questionnaire. This was done in class, on paper, at the very beginning of the project, in the first semester the students' second year of English studies.

The initial questionnaire comprised 8 questions, and aimed at clarifying what the students understood by "an academic text" and "academic writing" in English, and how well they perceived themselves as mastering academic writing in English at this stage in their studies. Four of the questions were semi-closed multiple choice questions, while the remaining four were open. The combination of semi-closed and open questions was chosen because semi-closed questions enable patterns to be observed and comparisons to be made, while open

questions make possible rich and personal data and invite personal comments from the respondents.

In the four semi-closed questions, the students were asked to evaluate their English academic writing proficiency by considering how challenging they found L2 academic writing to be in four different areas: "*using academic vocabulary*," "*utilizing relevant theory in the text*," "*structuring the text*," and "*performing a critical analysis*." Here, the answers were organized in rating scales with four alternatives: "*very easy*," "*easy*," "*quite challenging*," and "*very challenging*" in an effort to require a decision on rating to be indicated. The students were asked to tick the box corresponding to their answer, but were also given the chance to elaborate by adding comments below each individual question. On average, 12 of 18 students provided additional comments. The four open questions asked the students to share their prior experiences with writing informal and formal texts in English, and give their understanding of the concepts "an academic text" and "academic writing" in English.

Data analysis

In my analysis of the students' responses, I looked for patterns in their understanding of the two concepts, and in the elements the students identified as challenging in L2 academic writing. I used two different methods of analysis; in the analysis of the semi-closed questions, students' responses were summarized and collected in tables in an effort to identify patterns regarding which elements the students found challenging when writing academic texts in English. In the analysis of the open questions, I used open coding to compare and conceptualize the data into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in an effort to identify patterns in the students' understanding of the concepts "academic writing" in English and "academic text." Since many of the student responses to these two questions on overlapped, meaning that many of the same elements were mentioned in the students' answers to both questions, these were analyzed together, giving 36 respondents rather than 18.

I started the analysis by noting all the different elements the students identified as characteristic of "academic writing in English" and "an academic text." These were then coded and put into four categories: 1) *lexical/semantic*, which included references to the use of academic language and vocabulary; 2) *content*, which included references to research and theory; 3) *structure*, which included references to formal aspects such as form and style; and 4) *meta-level thinking*, which included references to the importance of reflection and discussion in academic texts and academic writing. These categories were discussed, tried out and adjusted in dialogue with fellow researchers. From this analysis, a clear pattern emerged in the students' understanding of the two concepts, resulting in two main categories, which I named *technical genre awareness*, comprising categories 1 – 3, and *metacognitive awareness*, comprising the fourth category. The fourth category was simply renamed and

not coded any further at this point. However, it will be developed further at a later stage in the project. The analysis of the fourth category will look specifically at the students' ability to question, reflect on and discuss the choices they have available, and to justify the decisions they make in the writing process. This is done in an effort to detect whether the students' reflections have facilitated further development of their metalinguistic awareness and competence.

Results and discussion

The analysis of the students' responses to the questionnaire reveals that elements of metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness are present in the students' thoughts about L2 academic writing and academic texts. However, the analysis also indicates that the students' metalinguistic awareness is limited at this point in their studies, particularly in relation to the practical use of L2 academic vocabulary. In terms of the students' metacognitive awareness, the analysis reveals that they perceive L2 academic writing as a technical endeavor. This is reflected in the fact that the majority of the students emphasize the technical aspects of academic texts and academic writing in English in their responses to the questionnaire.

The focus on the technical aspects of the genre is most clearly seen in the analysis of the two open questions, where all 36 student responses list one or more formal, structural, or stylistic element as characteristic of L2 academic writing and academic texts. This shows that the students are aware of the technical elements characteristic of the genre, and that certain formal and stylistic elements are required and expected in academic writing. In contrast, only 7 of 36 student responses also refer to the metacognitive aspects of the writing process, such as critical reflection and discussion, in their definitions of academic writing and academic texts.

There are three technical elements in particular which receive special attention from the students, and which are particularly prominent in their responses to the open questions (see figure 1). First of all, 18 of 36 student responses emphasize the importance of including research and theory into their texts; indeed, one student comments that "the most important thing is to get good research." A slightly smaller proportion, 12 of 36 student responses, stresses the importance of adhering to the genre's structure and style, one student commenting that there are "certain rules and norms in line with the rules of academic writing" which one must follow, for instance when it comes to "citations and the manner of giving them."

Finally, 13 of 36 student responses identify academic vocabulary and language as features characteristic of academic texts and academic writing in English. All 13 responses emphasize the importance of using appropriate L2

vocabulary and language in their academic writing, which in the words of one student means using "difficult words and complicated sentences." At the same time, the analysis of the semi-closed question on vocabulary reveals that 16 of 18 students find using academic vocabulary "quite challenging," while one student finds it "very challenging" (see figure 2). Various reasons are given here; one student comments that it is difficult to "know which words are more appropriate to use in an academic text," while another finds using academic vocabulary challenging because "this is words I normally do not use when I speak English [sic]." Many of the students also voice a concern that their academic vocabulary is "limited" and not advanced enough for writing academic texts in English, and that they spend much time on searching for appropriate vocabulary in dictionaries. As one student comments, she spends "a lot of time finding synonyms to words I feel to be a bit easy."
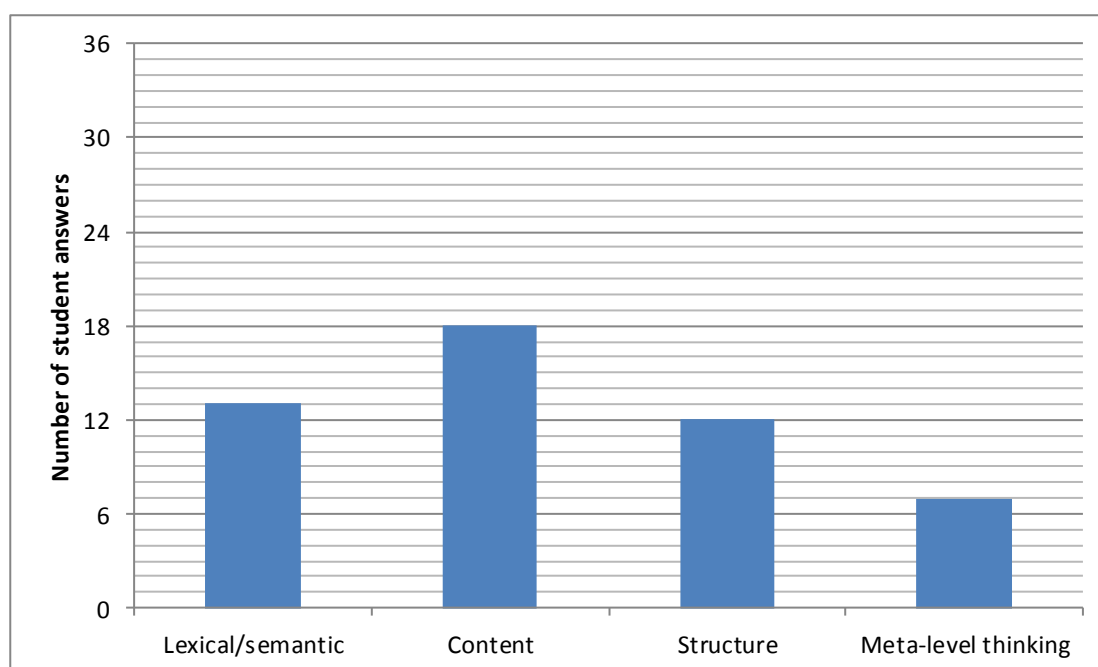

Figure 1: **Shows the students' responses to the following two open questions, coded into categories: "What do you understand by 'academic writing' in English?" and "What do you understand by 'an academic text' in English?"**
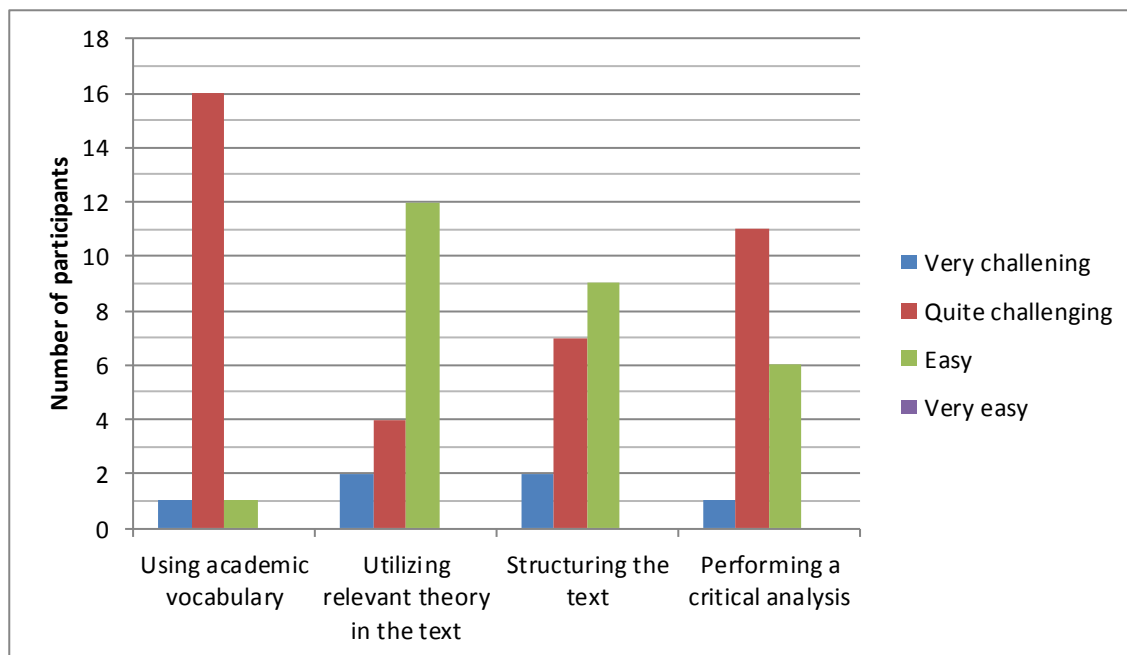
Figure 2: **Shows the students' responses to the following semi-closed question, summarized and collected in tables: "What do you find challenging about writing academic texts in English?"**

That the students find using academic vocabulary challenging is also reflected in their practical use of such vocabulary in their definitions of an academic text. Here, 14 of 18 students state that such a text is "based on," "includes," requires," or "consists of" relevant theory and research, while only 4 of 18 students point out that one should "reflect on" or "discuss" the theory and research one employs. The majority thus uses expressions that are concrete in meaning, while only a small minority employs traditional academic vocabulary.

The fact that the majority chooses to use a concrete vocabulary indicates limitations in the students' understanding of how to interpret and employ L2 academic vocabulary. Such vocabulary is complex as it embodies abstract concepts, and its meaning is often implicit; a part of the tacit knowledge of the discourse community which is often not articulated to the students. Consequently, while the meaning of academic vocabulary such as "discuss" and "reflect" might be clear to the established members of the discourse, it might not be obvious to the students. This might result in student insecurity as to how to interpret and employ such vocabulary in the academic context and therefore many students might, as these findings indicate, opt for a more concrete vocabulary so as to avoid the problem altogether.

The analysis of the students' responses to the questionnaire might thus indicate a possible discrepancy between what they state that they are concerned with in academic writing – which is using appropriate academic vocabulary, and what they actually do when they write about the topic in their responses – which is avoiding such vocabulary altogether. On the one hand, the students' concern with linguistic accuracy – with using appropriate L2 academic vocabulary in their writing – can be seen to reflect that they are aware of its importance within

the discourse community. Their concern implies that they understand that being able to express oneself in accordance with the accepted linguistic and stylistic conventions of the discourse community – to "talk the talk"– is both expected and required of them; indeed, that being able to do so is the key to success as well as to membership in the discourse community. At the same time, the fact that the majority of the students avoids using academic vocabulary altogether in their responses indicates that their metalinguistic awareness and skills as academic writers are limited at this point. This is supported by the fact that 17 of 18 students state that they find using L2 academic vocabulary "quite" or "very challenging." Consequently, the analysis indicates that while the students are aware of what type of vocabulary they are expected to use, they do not currently know how to employ it effectively in their writing; in other words, they lack the tools necessary to put their awareness into practice.

What materializes from the analysis is the need for raising the students' metalinguistic awareness about L2 academic vocabulary beyond the level of basic understanding of terminology onto the more abstract levels of interpreting and employing such vocabulary within the L2 academic context. In the context of this study, this involves making L2 academic vocabulary less abstract and elusive, and its meaning more easily accessible to the students. Doing so contributes to making the tacit conventions of L2 academic writing practices explicit to the students, by facilitating their understanding and knowledge of how to interpret and employ such vocabulary to make meaning in their L2 academic writing. In this way, raising students' awareness of L2 language and writing practices facilitates the further development of their L2 academic writing proficiency.

The following discussion argues the importance of conducting regular classroom conversations about L2 academic writing and its different components, including vocabulary, in the process of raising students' metalinguistic awareness about L2 academic writing and language practices. It also argues that the tutor plays an important role in facilitating the students' transition from metalinguistic awareness to metalinguistic competence, and that the tutor must share her personal epistemology related to L2 academic writing practices with her students for the transition to be successful.

Looking ahead: Implications for the future

Raising the students' metalinguistic awareness about L2 academic vocabulary and language entails addressing and discussing these issues in the L2 English classroom on a regular basis. It involves engaging students and tutors alike in what Cremin and Myhill (2012) refer to as "metalinguistic conversations" (p. 111). Such conversations serve the purpose of developing students' ability to reflect critically on and talk about their writing, the various discoursal choices

they make in the writing process, "and the reasoning behind those choices" (Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p. 111). Consequently, metalinguistic conversations facilitate active student involvement in the process of meaning-making by engaging students' thinking on a metacognitive level. Thus, metalinguistic conversations enable students to reprocess their knowledge about L2 vocabulary and language practices through reflection and discussion with the tutor and fellow students. Metalinguistic conversations thus become an important tool in raising the students' metalinguistic awareness in that it facilitates the students' ability to decipher the abstract and elusive nature of L2 academic vocabulary, as well as their ability to consider critically how their linguistic choices affect meaning within the L2 academic context. In this way, metalinguistic conversations about academic language and writing practices contribute to the students becoming "independent and creative decision-makers in their own right" (Cremin & Myhill, 2012, p. 111).

In metalinguistic conversations, the tutor plays an important role in stimulating metalinguistic thinking and awareness in the students. This requires her to actively engage the students in dialogue, talking about and reflecting upon every aspect of the writing process, including vocabulary and language use. In this way, metalinguistic conversations presuppose a participatory role on part of the tutor, and consequently imply a shift away from what has traditionally been perceived as the role of the tutor in higher education. Rather than simply assessing and evaluating student writing according to the established norms, values and standards of the discourse community, here the tutor actively interacts with the students in conversations about various elements related to L2 academic writing practices by catering to, participating in and contributing to the discussion. Consequently, metalinguistic conversations contribute to the tutor-student relationship becoming dialogic rather than monologic.

The dialogic and participatory nature of metalinguistic conversations requires students and tutors alike to share their knowledge and experience related to L2 academic writing practices. By doing so, students and tutors together create a platform upon which discussion of and reflection on the different aspects of the academic writing process, such as how the various language choices affect meaning, can take place. A shared understanding of these practices thus creates a common ground for negotiating meaning, and as such it constitutes an important element of metalinguistic conversations.

Also important to reach a shared understanding of L2 academic writing practices is the tutor sharing her personal epistemology – her beliefs, values, and practices – about these issues with her students. Doing so is important because, while such personal epistemologies are "rarely part of the conscious repertoire of classroom practice" (Wilson & Myhill, 2012, p. 556), they often influence what the tutor perceives as successful student writing (Lea & Street 2000; Wilson & Myhill 2012). Consequently, the tutor making the tacit aspects of her personal epistemology explicit to her students is important for a shared

understanding of L2 academic writing practices to be achieved in the classroom. Additionally, sharing these aspects of her practice with her students might be a useful exercise for the tutor as well, as it contributes to making explicit to herself what she considers to be good writing choices and good student writing.

Finally, reaching a shared understanding of L2 academic writing practices also implies that students and tutors share a language for talking about the elements and issues involved. In other words, they need a shared metalanguage to employ in their metalinguistic conversations, through which the various linguistic and discoursal choices involved in the writing process can be discussed, and a common understanding reached.

As such, regular metalinguistic conversations combined with a metalanguage shared by tutors and students alike are invaluable tools in the process of facilitating the students' development into independent and autonomous writers of L2 academic texts, as they cater to the transition of students' metalinguistic awareness about L2 academic language and writing practices into metalinguistic competence of how to effectively employ these elements in their writing.

Conclusion

The results of this study identify one area within the teaching of English academic writing in higher education where there is room for improvement, and which merits greater attention in L2 higher education in the future. While the sample is too small for generalizations to be made, the study concludes that elements of metalinguistic awareness about L2 vocabulary and language use are present in the students' thoughts on academic writing, as reflected in their great concern with using appropriate L2 academic vocabulary in their writing. However, the findings also imply that the students' metalinguistic awareness is currently limited to the basic level of understanding and employing L2 terminology, as indicated by their deciding to avoid using such vocabulary in their responses. Consequently, the study's findings indicate that there is a need for a greater focus on L2 academic writing practices in L2 higher education. More specifically, the study argues that there is a need to raise students' metalinguistic awareness of L2 academic vocabulary beyond the basic level of understanding onto more abstract levels of how to interpret and employ such vocabulary effectively in their academic writing.

The study argues that metalinguistic conversations, held in the L2 classroom on a regular basis, can be an important tool in this process. This implies making the classroom a venue for regular talk about language practices and writing choices. The classroom must be a place where students and tutors alike share their experience and knowledge, and reflect, discuss and negotiate a shared understanding of the different practices of L2 academic writing. In the context of L2 higher education, the study sees that metalinguistic conversations can be

an important tool the process of raising students' metalinguistic awareness about L2 academic vocabulary and writing practices, and in facilitating the students' transition from metalinguistic awareness into metalinguistic competence on these issues. In this way, the study sees metalinguistic conversations as an important tool in the process of facilitating students' further development of English academic writing proficiency.

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