



Respect, Critique, and Academic Voice: Pakistani Postgraduate Students' Negotiation of Authority in Dissertation Writing

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Abstract

The problem of development of academic voice is one of the significant and difficult issues of postgraduate dissertation writing, especially in the context of academic culture which is hierarchical. The current study examines the negotiation of academic voice by Pakistani post-graduate dissertation writers in the context of supervisor and examiner's feedback while writing their dissertations. The exploration draws upon the theory of Etienne Wenger (1998) Communities of Practice and Mikhail Bakhtin dialogism (1981), and focuses on the role of feedback as a process of disciplinary socialization, participation in scholarship, and construction of identity. Nine Pakistani postgraduate students were interviewed using open-ended questions on their experiences of feedback, critique and academic writing. The results indicated that the participants' tendency to write descriptively and eventually to analyze and interpret their experiences was to be expected, as they continued to write in a reflexive style guided by their supervisors, using Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. The study also revealed that participants' ideas of respect for authority sometimes conflicted with their desire to evaluate existing scholars. Moreover, feedback was demonstrated to have developmental and emotional impact on scholarly identity and confidence. The study has implications for other studies focusing on academic voice, feedback practices, and postgraduate writing in multilingual and culturally located settings of post graduate education (Bakhtin, 1981; Wenger, 1998).

Keywords: Academic voice, postgraduate dissertation writing, Communities of Practice, thematic analysis



Introduction

Academic writing at the postgraduate level is not simply a process of reproducing what has already been known, but a process of developing an "academic voice" that is visible in the writing process and that places writers in the academic discourse communities of their discipline. For postgraduate dissertation writers, and especially those whose native language is not English, developing such a voice is frequently difficult as they must be able to perform both critique and originality and give a voice to the authority of the scholar (Hyland, 2002; Ivanič, 1998). In Pakistani academic settings, this challenge can be more nuanced because of sociocultural norms around being respectful to authority figures, not being too assertive with disagreement, and bowing to experts. This makes it very difficult for many postgraduate students to go beyond description to analysis and interpretation of literature. Through this process, the role of the supervisor/examiner is an important factor in helping students develop toward the disciplinary standard of argumentation, stance taking, and critical participation (Lee, 2008).

The value of feedback, scholarly identity and engagement with disciplinary communities have been identified from existing studies on academic voice, but there is a lack of attention paid to the ways in which these processes might be experienced in culturally specific academic environments in Pakistan. This study is based upon Etienne Wenger Communities of Practice and looks at how academic voice is slowly built in the context of graduate students' writing of dissertations with their supervisors and examiners. Feed back, from this point of view, is not just pedagogical guidance, but also a kind of socialization in a discipline, as a way to learn how to participate in scientific discourse appropriately (Wenger, 1998). The study examines these themes of respect, critique, confidence and scholarly identity, as negotiated by the Pakistani postgraduate students while learning to develop a voice in their studies, through reflexive thematic analysis, according to the method of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. The results add to the wider debate about academic writing, feedback practices and the sociocultural aspects of postgraduate research writing (Canagarajah, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Literature Review

Academic voice has been explored in many ways, one of which is through Mikhail Bakhtin Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which considers writing as a socially embedded and interactive process that is influenced by interaction with various voices and discourses. Bakhtin (1981) claimed that no sounds are separated, since every speech act echoes prior voices and looks forward to future reactions. In terms of academic writing, this view implies that the postgraduate author builds up their voice by engaging with their supervisors, examiners, the conventions of his or her discipline and the writings of practising scholars. Instead of creating original and singular interpretations, writers argue their own interpretations relative to authoritative academic interpretations. It is especially important in the context of dissertation writing, when the student has to show respect for the current scholarship and define their own scholarly position. Other research in academic writing has highlighted that voice is not only a linguistic construct but also a dialogic and social one that develops through involvement in the communities of the disciplines (Hyland, 2002). Hence, Bakhtin's dialogism offers a useful lens to the postgraduate writers' learning to critically situate themselves within the context of authoritative scholarly discourse.



Bakhtinian perspectives are of particular importance in multilingual and culturally hierarchical contexts like that of Pakistan, where a student's culture may demand deference and the school setting demands critique. In the field of research on writer identity and academic discourse, novices often experience a lack of confidence in expressing themselves, the imbalance in authority and fear of contesting the ideas of the established scholar (Ivanič, 1998). Academic writing, accordingly, can be looked at from a dialogic viewpoint as a way of negotiating multiple voices, identities, and ideologies instead of merely the formal writing conventions. Supervisor feedback thus has an important influence on the way post graduate writers interpret authority-based academic discourses and become increasingly confident in their own interpretations. Supervisors provide indirect cues to students to engage in scholarly conversation by comments that encourage them to “take a position” or “stop hiding behind references.” In this way Bakhtin's approach is an appropriate one to analyze how Pakistani postgraduate dissertation writers construct their academic voice, contest authority and critique.

Many have used Etienne Wenger Communities of Practice (CoP) to describe how learning takes place while participating in communities of social and disciplinary life, rather than individual life. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a process of gradual transition from peripheral participation to fuller participation as novices learn the norms, language and practices of a community. For post-graduate dissertation writers, the academic environment is where they develop the skills to build arguments, argue in a critical way, and manipulate and interact with academic discourse with their supervisors, examiners, and expectations. The idea of voice is also relevant to development of academic voice, as voice is not only the result of linguistic competency but of participation in academic communities which socialize students into accepted academic practices (Wenger, 1998). Feedback has been noted as being an important part of this process, helping new researchers to adopt disciplinary ways of representing ideas and authorship (Lee, 2008). Thematic analysis is used in the present study as a tool for the systematic exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and negotiations of academic voice in their academic context, which is connected to the work of CoP by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. Feedback, authority, critique and scholarly identity are key themes that can be read into the broader disciplinary participation and academic socialization process in the manner of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019).

The study and development of academic voice by postgraduate writers has become a socially mediated, dialogic process, rather than an individual linguistic achievement. Research indicates that doctoral students and master's students develop their disciplinary identity through long-term interaction with disciplinary discourse, through interaction with their supervisor, and through their involvement in the academic community (Aitchison, 2009; Kamler & Thomson, 2014). Feedback is a key element of this process as it has the potential to give students opportunities to negotiate an author's presence, gain confidence in stating evaluative positions, and extend beyond descriptive writing into critical engagement with knowledge (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Carless, 2013). Research studies have also found that novice researchers are likely to have difficulty in trying to please the existing research authority while also wanting to show originality and criticality in their own writing (Casanave, 2002; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). Academic voice is a sociocultural phenomenon because it is developed as a learner's involvement in the practices of a discipline gradually enables them to learn the linguistic and



epistemological conventions of the discipline valued by their scholarly communities (Gee, 2015; Lea & Street, 1998). Additionally, identity development has been identified as occurring in the doctoral supervision process, with feedback and dialogue influencing students' perceptions of what it means to write and think as an independent researcher (Manathunga, 2007, McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009).

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions and negotiation of academic voice by Pakistani post graduate dissertation writers in relation to supervisor and examiner feedbacks during the dissertation writing process?
2. How do post graduate students in Pakistan perform in academic writing with regard to respect of authority in the light of soci cultural values?

Research Objectives

1. To Explore the role of supervisor and examiner's feedback in building academic voice of Pakistani postgraduate dissertation writers.
2. To investigate the postgraduate students critique, stance taking and scholarly positioning in the writing of dissertation within the context of Pakistani sociocultural orientations towards authority and respect.

Significance of the Study

This study is important because it adds to the burgeoning research literature on academic voice, postgraduate writing, and supervisory feedback, all of which are pertinent to the academic writing in the non-Western context, specifically in Pakistan. The research provides insight into the sociocultural and emotional aspects of academic writing development by examining the relationship between Pakistani postgraduate dissertation writers and the supervisor and examiner in the light of criticism, authority and scholarly identity. The results show that academic voice is a linguistically negotiated activity, not only a linguistic ability, but a socially and culturally negotiated activity, created by the engagement with academic communities, and the interaction with authoritative voices. In addition, the study offers implications for supervisors, examiners, and higher education institutions by highlighting the need for a focus on practices of constructive and dialogic feedback that foster both critical engagement and writer confidence. The study also builds on the theoretical work of Etienne Wenger Communities of Practice (CoPs) and Mikhail Bakhtin dialogism, which continues the theoretical debate surrounding academic socialization and scholarly identity of postgraduate researchers in multilingual and culturally hierarchical environments (Wenger, 1998).

Research Gap

Despite the significant amount of research that exists on academic voice, English as a medium of instruction in higher education, and postgraduate writing in the context of L2 contexts, there is little research available on how post graduate dissertation writers negotiate academic voice in a culturally embedded academic field in L2 contexts. Previous research has primarily examined linguistic aspects of voice, supervisory practices, or doctorate writing in Western settings, and there are comparatively few studies that have investigated sociocultural expectations of authority, respect, and critique in postgraduate writing in Pakistan. Additionally, there has been little research on how supervisor and examiner feedback works together as a pedagogical, emotional, and socializing process in which students acquire the sociality of being part of a discipline and the presence of an author. To fill this gap, the present study explores the nature of negotiating critiques,



scholarly identity, and academic voice in dissertation writing process (DSW) for Pakistani postgraduate dissertation writers in the light of Etienne Wenger Communities of Practice and Mikhail Bakhtin dialogism (Hyland, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Etienne Wenger Communities of Practice (CoP) and Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is used to analyze the process in which Pakistani postgraduate dissertation writers construct academic voice in their dissertation in dialogue with their supervisor and examiner. Communities of Practice (CoP) is proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and later developed by Wenger (1998) that learning is a social process that happens when people participate in a shared community of practice. In the academic context, postgraduate students make a gradual transition from “peripheral” to “full” engagement in the discipline community through the process of acquiring the norms, practices and conventions of the academic community through communicative interaction. Feedback from supervisors and examiners is therefore a key element of academic socialisation, and novice researchers get the opportunity to learn how to make arguments, to take an active but critical stance, and to participate in scholarly dialogue (Wenger, 1998). The theory is especially pertinent in the context of dissertation writing, as students are not only learning how to write, but they are also seeking to become members of academic communities.

The work of Communities of Practice introduces the concept of participation and socialization in the disciplines, while Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is more in-depth analysis of how academic voice is developed in the interaction with different authoritative voices that are present in academic discourse (Bakhtin, 1981). All language is dialogic, Bakhtin argues, in that writers respond to previous voices, points of view, and ideologies at all times. When writing a dissertation, postgraduates listen to the voices of their supervisors, examiners, and well-known researchers, and try to create their own authorial voice. Within the Pakistani academic context, the negotiation is particularly relevant because of the importance that is placed on respect for authority and seniority, which can influence students' willingness to openly criticize established scholars. Thus, Bakhtin's approach can be used to articulate the conflict that takes place between a respectful attitude and an assertive scholarly tone among the participants. Academic voice, as a socially-learned practice and as a dialogic negotiation of authority, identity and participation in academic discourse communities (Hyland, 2002; Ivanič, 1998) is conceptualized through Communities of Practice and dialogism.

The study uses reflexive thematic analysis (VA) by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke to analyze the experiences of the participants. Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) is appropriate for this study as it enables the analysis and interpretation of emerging patterns, meanings and experiences in the participants' stories. In this manner, issues of feedback, authority, critique, identity and academic voice can be identified, discussed, and explored in a systematic fashion, while also being attuned to the sociocultural contexts of the people involved in the research. Reflexive thematic analysis also fits into the interpretivist paradigm of this study because it recognizes that meaning is co-constructed in the relationship between the researcher, the data, and the interpretation of the data.



Braun and Clarke Thematic Analysis Table

Sr #	Respondents	Quotes	Themes	Sub themes	Codes
1	R1	“The reader is never interested in knowing the numbers but what those numbers mean and imply.”	Developing Academic Voice Through Critical Positioning	Moving beyond descriptive writing	Need for interpretation
23	R2	“You must be quite categorical here. Don’t just describe.”	Developing Academic Voice Through Critical Positioning	Analytical positioning	Encouragement to take stance
	R3	“I previously feared to criticize anybody because it might make me seem disrespectful.”	Negotiating Critique and Scholarly Authority	Cultural hesitation toward critique	Fear of disrespect
	R3	“Your voice is getting lost in the description.”	Developing Academic Voice Through Critical Positioning	Need for analytical engagement	Voice invisibility
	R3	“Its trash, or revise complete chapter according to the guidelines.”	Emotional Dimensions of Feedback	Emotional impact of criticism	Harsh evaluative feedback
4	R4	“You have not mentioned where you are in this argument.”	Developing Academic Voice Through Critical Positioning	Authorial visibility	Lack of authorial presence
5	R5	“This section is written like a textbook and no longer like a thesis.”	Developing Academic Voice Through Critical Positioning	Transition from summary to critique	Overly descriptive writing
6	R6	“You are being too cautious — take a position.”	Negotiating Critique and Scholarly Authority	Developing confidence in critique	Fear of assertiveness



7	R7	“I grew up in an environment where respect to authority is anticipated as an obligation.”	Negotiating Critique and Scholarly Authority	Influence of sociocultural norms	Respect for authority
8	R8	“It was depressing in the start and I got afraid of sending my work to him again.”	Writer insecurity	Emotional Dimensions of Feedback	Fear and anxiety
9	R9	“You are reporting knowledge, not producing it.”	Feedback as Scholarly Socialization	Knowledge construction	Requires negotiation
10s	R10	“This does not sound like a doctoral work.”	Emotional Dimensions of Feedback	Threat to scholarly identity	Demoralizing feedback

DESCRIPTIONS

The thematic analysis of the participants' responses is organised in terms of table here according to the approach of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, 2019) which includes six phases. In the first phase, the data was familiarized with by repeatedly reading the participants' stories related to the supervision and examination process while writing their dissertations. In the second phase, initial codes were created by identifying the patterns that emerged and meaningful statements that were linked with academic voice, critique, authority, emotional responses, and scholarly identity. For example, “don't just describe” was categorized as a stance-taking, analytical writing response, and “it shattered me every time” was categorized as emotional distress and writer insecurity response. The coding process was inductive, and, at the same time, theoretically grounded in the concepts of Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998) and dialogism (Bakhtin 1981), which also enabled the consideration of social participation and negotiation of authoritative voices.

During the later stages of the thematic analysis, the related codes were grouped together into sub-themes and themes to reveal the patterned meanings in the participants' experiences. Stance-taking, authorial presence and interpretation were considered together under the umbrella of “Developing Academic Voice Through Critical Positioning” and culturally derived hesitation about critique and respect for authority were grouped under “Negotiating Critique and Scholarly Authority”. Likewise, the affective nature of supervisory interactions in the process of writers' identity was revealed in the theme of being emotionally involved in unclear or harsh feedback. Finally, 'Feedback as Scholarly Socialization' referred to the kinds of feedback that fostered the growth of confidence and disciplinary learning as postgraduate writers began to see how to participate in acceptable ways within academic discourse communities. In keeping with the reflexive model of Braun and Clarke (2019), the theme development followed a continuous process and movement between data, codes, theoretical interpretation and researcher reflexivity, as it was necessary to ensure that the themes presented the participants' lived experiences meaningfully in Pakistani post-graduate academic settings.



Findings

The results of this study show that academic voice development of Pakistani masters dissertation writers is closely related to supervisory feedback and involvement in academic discourse communities. The comments “take a position,” “don't just describe,” and “stop hiding behind references” were repeated to the participants as they made their way from descriptive to analytical positioning. The results are consistent with the theory on Communities of Practices developed by Etienne Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In this study, the act of being supervised served as a disciplinary apprenticeship for the post-graduate students to learn acceptable scholarly practices such as critique, interpretation, and positioning as an author. Thematic analysis showed that at the beginning participants were very dependent on summarization and citation to establish their legitimacy, but feedback was given to them that made them focus on their own interpretations and analysis. The shift from “reporting knowledge” to “producing knowledge” is an indication of a shift from peripheral to fuller academic engagement in research communities. The results also corroborate earlier research that indicated that academic voice is a socially acquired process rather than a natural ability that is shaped by interaction, feedback, and required by the discipline (Hyland, 2002; Ivanič, 1998).

Some suggested that they were uncomfortable criticizing established scholars since it was thought that the word critique could be demeaning and in Pakistani academic culture, it is important to respect the senior scholars. The conflicts that occurred as they tried to speak in an assertive scholarly voice are evident in such comments as “I feared criticizing anybody because it might seem disrespectful,” and “respect to authority is anticipated as an obligation.” The interpretation of these results can be done using the concept of dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin Bakhtin which takes the point of view of Academic Writing as a dialogic negotiation between various voices and authoritative discourses (Bakhtin, 1981). Participants were not writing alone, but were negotiating their voice with the voice of their supervisors, examiners and preeminent scholars. Thematic findings indicate that postgraduate writers tried to create a balance between respect and critique by using conservative evaluative language, and evidence-based disagreement. The academic voice, rather, became a type of negotiation, a learned voice that was negotiated by cultural expectations, disciplinary norms, and the dialogic engagement with authoritative knowledge.

A second key finding has to do with the emotional aspect of feedback and how it relates to the development of scholarly identity. Feedback that was demoralizing, shattering and confidence-debilitating was described by the participants, especially when it was not clearly understood and constructive. Themes of emotional distress, fear of inadequacy and writer insecurity appeared throughout the data and were identified through reflexive thematic analysis. However, encouraging and building feedback sometimes improved the confidence and budding scholarly identities of participants. The emotional experiences, from a Communities of Practice (CoP) approach, are seen as part of the process of becoming legitimate members of academic communities, developing identity through acquiring skills (Wenger, 1998). Concurrently, the results suggest feedback practices can shape not only revision of texts but the sense of legitimacy, competence and belonging in the academic community of writers. The themes in this study, identified through what Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) call reflexive thematic analysis, definitely reveal the interconnections between feedback, identity, authority and participation in the



development of the academic voice of Pakistani postgraduate dissertation writers. In this regard, the study also adds to the general debates on doctoral writing, supervisory practices, and sociocultural aspects of the development of academic literacy.

The results of this research align with past studies showing that academic voice develops in interaction, feedback, and participating in disciplinary communities, not in isolation. The participants' own narratives indicated that their feedback often facilitated their becoming more critical, more confident and more present as writers, thus reinforcing the notion that feedback is a social practice that can aid in the development of their academic identities (Carless, 2013; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The shift from descriptive reporting to interpretation, critique and position taking by the respondents is also similar with the study results presented by Casanave (2002) and Kamler and Thomson (2014) which state that post-graduate writers gradually acquire the ability to take their own position in the writing process as they experience academic discourse. Furthermore, the participant tensions about respect for authority and challenge to established scholars are in line with the academic literacies perspective of viewing writing as a process of negotiating power, identity, and the expectations of the discipline (Lea & Street, 1998). As per sociocultural understandings of learning, the experiences of the participants indicate that supervision feedback is not only used to develop writing but also to develop academic voice, confidence and researcher identity, as this identity is continuously constructed and ongoing (Aitchison, 2009; Gee, 2015; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009).

Conclusion

This study attempted to examine the process of voice negotiation in the Pakistani postgraduate dissertation writing within the cultural context of academic environment, through the feedback from the supervisor and examiner. These findings were informed by two theoretical frameworks: the theory of academic voice based on the ideas of Etienne Wenger Communities of Practice CoP (1998) and Mikhail Bakhtin dialogism (1918). The study found that as the writing shifted from descriptive and citation-oriented to analytical and interpretive, the feedback that encouraged the creation of a stance and engagement with critique and visibility of the author was observed over time. Concurrently the results indicated the effect of Pakistani socio-cultural values on respect for authority which could prove quite an emotional and intellectual hurdle for post-graduate writers when it came to critical engagement. Moreover, the study emphasized that feedback can be used as a pedagogical tool, but also as an emotional and socializing process in the development of scholarly confidence, identity and participation in academic discourse communities. The study draws on Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke reflexive thematic analysis (2006) to make a contribution to the broader discourses on academic writing, doctoral supervision, and the sociocultural aspects of voice in higher education contexts.

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