ACADEMIC READERS AND WRITERS: NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract: Native and non-native speakers of English must be able to conduct equally appropriate reading and writing activities in their specialty fields according to the current requirements of the international academic environment. Therefore, this paper aims to present the characteristics of native and non-native scientists as readers and writers with the purpose of identifying differences attributable to linguistic or cultural factors for a better understanding of the challenges that non-native academics are confronted with in their attempt to carry out successful academic activities at international level.

KEY WORDS: *native speakers of English, non-native speakers of English, academic reading, academic writing, linguistic inequality, author identity.*

English has become the international language of academic discourse, scientific communication and education. This is reflected in the massive number of English-language research articles published in international journals and included in databases, the high impact factor, visibility and citation opportunities associated with English-language publications, the increasingly larger number of universities in non-Anglophone countries, Romania included, offering English-medium instruction to international students, the incentives provided by numerous national academic systems, including the Romanian one, which reward English over national language publication, or the implementation of the Bologna system by the European Union. One of the consequences of this predominance is the increased focus on the reading and writing practices of non-native researchers, including their understanding and use of writing conventions and rhetorical strategies, the possible impact of cultural factors on their reading and writing habits, or the existence of publication issues and challenges that might negatively affect them. Given this context, the current paper aims to present the characteristics of native and non-native scientists as readers and writers in order to identify possible differences

attributable to linguistic or cultural factors able to explain existing differences between these two groups. Such an analysis could lead to a better understanding of the challenges that non-native academics are confronted with in their attempt to carry out successful academic activities at international level. The results could also be relevant for specialists in the English for Specific Purposes field interested in finding solutions for improved teaching and learning results.

Reading habits and writing practices are coexisting activities in the academic environment. Scientists cannot carry out research and present it in written form as their original contribution without keeping up-to-date with the advances of science in their respective field of activity. Reading was acknowledged and studied as an individual activity integrated into the larger scientific community: "although each reading is a personally constructed event, the individual reading is embedded in communally regularized forms, institutions, practices, and goals"[1]. This view is similar to that expressed by Bhatia[2] regarding the professional, organizational, social and individual identities academics simultaneously have when writing as members of a discourse community, suggesting that the same identities and mechanisms are employed during both reading and writing activities.

Bazerman also mentioned the importance of reading for constantly reconstructing meaning and highlighted the role of intertextuality, as revealed by existing studies on article citations, which prove how reading and writing are closely linked for the purpose of creating knowledge. Bazerman's investigation into the reading processes of research physicists from the US was based on data obtained following interviews and observations, and focused on the readers' purpose for reading, as well as use of their structured background knowledge or schemata for text comprehension[3].

The reading habits of first language English speakers were also investigated by other more quantitative studies like the one conducted on US internists[4], whose results indicated patterns similar with those obtained by Bazerman. For instance, researchers employ selective reading strategies, with physicists focusing on *Introduction* and *Conclusion* sections of research articles, and internists on *Abstracts* for the selection of relevant material. According to another study[5], UK trainee doctors are frequent readers of specialized journals, review series and textbooks for educational purposes, while online medical literature under the form of databases and full text articles was found to be more available in EU compared with CIS

[1] Bazerman 1988: 235
[2] Bhatia 2004
[3] Bazerman 1988
[4] Saint *et al* 2000
[5] Myerson *et al* 2000

countries[6]. However, such mainly quantitative studies can only determine how much and what scientists read, leaving unanswered deeper issues connected with motivation, purposes, comprehension, critical analysis, first language interference or transfer of reading and writing skills.

The above-mentioned studies were found while searching for bibliographic resources regarding the reading habits of non-native speakers on English. Besides a descriptive, cross-sectional study on the reading practices of Pakistani physicians[7], the only relevant publications found were a study on the structural variables affecting students' comprehension of medical English abstracts[8], a study of Japanese researchers' strategies for coping with language difficulties and succeeding in writing research articles in English[9], and a review of existing studies on second language research[10]. No studies on the reading habits of Romanian academics were found, which indicates the existence of a research gap in this area.

Salager-Meyer[11] conducted a qualitative and quantitative analysis based on questionnaires administered to native speakers of Spanish enrolled as students in an English for Medical Purposes course at a university hospital in Venezuela. The aim was to observe whether second language competence, text structure (structured vs. unstructured abstracts of medical articles) and medical background knowledge influenced the students' reading comprehension. The findings suggested that reading comprehension was influenced more by the subjects' background knowledge, exposure to similar reading material and second language competence than by text structure. By signaling the role of the schemata brought by both native and non-native readers into the text for comprehension purposes, these results are in line with previously reported findings[12]. Moreover, in the case of non-native subjects, reading practice proved to increase language competence, which in turn led to enhanced reading skills.

An interesting finding linking reading and writing practices was reported by Okamura[13], who interviewed Japanese research article writers in the fields of Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine and Pharmacology in order to assess their awareness of language difficulties and rhetorical differences between English and their first language, and to reveal their strategies for coping with such setbacks. The results indicated that the investigated Japanese researchers read articles written by native speakers of English not only to gain subject knowledge in

[6] Van der Voort *et al* 2012
[7] Khaliq *et al* 2012
[8] Salager-Meyer 1994
[9] Okamura 2006
[10] Ulijn and Salager-Meyer 1998
[11] Salager-Meyer 1994
[12] Bazerman 1988
[13] Okamura 2006

their field but also with the language-oriented purpose of improving their writing skills through the collection of useful phrases. Reading research articles had been previously identified as an important source of learning to write articles since "the written product evidently provides a strong pedagogic/ heuristic framework; being able to 'borrow' phrases and to pick out 'smart expressions' from published articles written by English native speakers are considered necessary and valuable skills"[14]. However, both studies acknowledged that reading alone is not enough to improve scientists' writing skills, although this proved to be a strategy adopted by non-native speakers, and that other factors contribute to successful academic reporting as well.

Issues such as the role of background knowledge and schemata were also discussed in an overview aimed at establishing whether Reading for Professional Purposes in a second language is influenced by language proficiency or by reading skills in general, i.e. if reading is a linguistic or cognitive problem[15]. Successful reading was mainly associated with solid vocabulary knowledge, although expert readers such as doctors prefer standard terms instead of simplified vocabulary, as well as with domain-specific knowledge, which allows for more inferences and richer mental representations of texts. Texts with logical and conventional structures were also found to favor the activation of schemata for easier text interpretation. As far as the transfer of reading skills from the first to the second language is concerned, this was considered possible above a certain second language threshold, which should generally correspond to a minimum B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages[16]. However, definitive conclusions leading to generalizations could not be clearly established and some of these ideas were later challenged by other writers. One such example is Hyland's position against the transfer of reading and writing skills across languages or courses of study due to the different literacy expectations that second language speakers are confronted with in a new educational or work environment[17].

As far as the writing practices of non-native academics and students are concerned, the literature revealed that the most investigated issues were related with writing and publication difficulties in a second language under the possible influence of linguistic or cultural factors, alongside issues of second language writer identity and writer-reader interaction in academic prose. The questions generated by these focus points were whether the English-language production of natives and non-natives differs, in which respects, why and what English for Specific Purposes teaching strategies are

[14] Gosden 1992: 134-135
[15] Ulijn and Salager-Meyer 1998
[16] Council of Europe 2001
[17] Hyland 2013

needed. The particular aims and settings of the contributions in this field generated different and often conflicting results. Again, the existence of a research gap is indicated by the lack of reference to the writing habits of Romanian scientists, apart from one study focusing on publication-related issues[18].

One of the main questions regarding possible differences between native and non-native academic writers, which in turn can generate differences in writer identity with direct consequences on writing style and international publication output is that of linguistic inequality. Non-native writers are often thought to be at a disadvantage compared with native academics, as they must not only possess excellent language skills but also familiarity with Anglophone language conventions and rhetorical practices in order to have their work results vetted by English-speaking editors and then accepted by native speaker readers.

In this respect, although several researchers[19] supported the theory of linguistic inequality, half of the Romanian academics investigated by Mureşan and Perez-Llantada acknowledged the unfair advantage of native-speaking academics and the pressure to publish in English, but also declared to be more advantaged in their work by the use of English as a shared research language[20]. Most of the Spanish academics investigated by Ferguson *et al* also reported feeling more advantaged than disadvantaged by the dominance of English in the scientific and academic environment, at the same time agreeing on the need for only one international language of science, technology and academic exchange[21].

Comparable results were also obtained by Tardy, who used questionnaires and focus group interviews in order to assess the attitudes towards English as the international language of science of 45 international graduate students from various countries enrolled at a US university[22]. Most of the respondents acknowledged the benefits of English, such as ease of sharing and accessing information, ease of international communication among specialists or the facilitation of scientific progress through the use of a common language. However, they also identified the long time spent learning English as a major drawback, alongside the risk of miscommunication and disadvantage when it comes to international publication. The usefulness of using only one international language revealed by these studies may be connected with the respondents' already gained familiarity with English language usage for academic purposes,

[18] Mureşan and Perez-Llantada 2014
[19] Crystal 2003; Flowerdew 2013; Hyland and Salager-Meyer 2008; Okamura 2006; Tonkin 2011
[20] Mureşan and Perez-Llantada 2014
[21] Ferguson *et al* 2011
[22] Tardy 2004

which now enables them to skillfully use an acquired skill to their advantage, without suffering any major setbacks.

Similarly, other researchers[23] also believed that most article rejections are usually related with flaws in research design and methodology, coherence of argument or general academic literacy, and that "the most important distinction in today's research world is in consequence not that between native speakers and non-native speakers of English but between experienced or 'senior' researcher/scholars and less experienced or 'junior' ones"[24].

However, certain differences were identified between the way native and non-native speakers of English express themselves in academic writing. One such rhetorical difference is connected with how writers construct their audiences and interact with them. Research has indicated that native writers have a more reader-oriented style and regard their audience as potentially consenting while non-native writers regard their readers as possibly dissenting and thus choose to introduce their claims differently[25].

A look at the potential differences between the characteristics of native and non-native academic writers from the point of view of the target audience revealed that the latter seem to be at a disadvantage as Anglophone and non-Anglophone readers prefer to read texts written by native speakers of English over those produced by non-native users of the language[26]. The explanation put forward is related not so much with the stylistic quality of the texts as with the choice of discourse structures and cultural models that readers are accustomed to. Thus, readers in general seem to prefer texts that confirm their own knowledge, values and ways of organizing texts in order to correspond to dominant research paradigms.

Similarly, Paltridge noted the difficulty second language students have in establishing their writer identity and attributed it to "students bringing a different writer 'voice' from their first language setting to the second language writing situation"[27]. This statement suggests the non-transferrable character of writing skills across languages also supported by Hyland[28] but contradicted by other researchers[29], as well as the existence of cultural patterns able to influence written production.

The issue of author identity in non-native speakers of English was also investigated in another study[30], whose findings revealed significant

[23] Swales 2004; Ferguson *et al* 2011
[24] Swales 2004: 56
[25] Mauranen *et al* 2010
[26] Hamel, 2007
[27] Paltridge 2006: 43
[28] Hyland 2013
[29] Carson *et al* 1990; Hinkel 1997; Ulijn and Salager-Meyer 1998; Alonso-Alonso *et al* 2012
[30] Hyland 2002

underuse of personal pronouns in a group of undergraduate theses written by Hong Kong students, indicative of the fact that these had consciously avoided authorial visibility in their texts, unlike in their first language, instead opting for reduced responsibility and presence. In this case, possible cultural differences and the students' background were blamed as they were believed to influence pragmatic discourse practices. The influence of first language transferrable writing concepts and conventions was also supported by Hinkel[31], who pointed out the difficulty in teaching second language composition to students who had already received first language writing instruction, at the same time highlighting the importance of correctly using the rhetorical strategies characteristic of the second language, such as the ability to be vague as means of becoming successful academic writers.

Another study focusing on author identity compared the use of first person pronouns in a corpus of Chemistry research articles written by native vs. Iranian speakers of English and found that the latter used more personal pronouns, in this way displaying more personal involvement and visibility than native speakers[32].

A summary of the most important areas in which non-native speakers of English experience difficulty when writing for scholarly publication was put together by Flowerdew, who listed "grammar; use of citations; making reference to the published literature; structuring of argument; textual organization; relating text to audience; ways in which to make knowledge claims; ways in which to reveal or conceal the point of view of the author; use of 'hedges' to indicate caution expected by the academic community; 'interference' of different cultural views regarding the nature of academic processes"[33].

Many of these areas of difficulty are mostly connected with writing the *Introduction* and *Discussion* sections of scientific research articles. Especially in the final part of research articles writers must construct their authorial self in order to appropriately interact with the audience and facilitate the acceptance of their knowledge claims. Failure to do so may result in the denial of claims, regardless of their possible relevance. This is probably why *Discussion* sections were found to be one of the most challenging parts to write in a research article. The results obtained by Moreno *et al*[34] corroborated this hypothesis. Their study of Spanish researchers' perceived difficulty writing research articles in English, assessed through the administration of structured questionnaires revealed that most participants regarded writing the *Discussion* section to be a more difficult task in English than in Spanish, irrespective of the knowledge area

[31] Hinkel 1997
[32] Behnam *et al* 2014
[33] Flowerdew 1999: 127
[34] Moreno *et al* 2012

investigated and the respondents' self-reported level of English language proficiency. The rhetorical transfer hypothesis was believed to account for these findings given the Spanish writers' lower tendency to express criticism of other people's work in *Discussion* sections. Self-reported lower levels of English language proficiency also correlated positively with higher perceived difficulty writing *Discussion* sections for international publication in English-medium journals.

Despite the close connection between reading and writing practices, the transfer of skills from the receptive context of reading to the productive enterprise of writings requires more than intensive reading with the purpose of gathering useful phrases for later use when writing in a second language. In this respect, the results of the above-mentioned study carried out by Okamura[35] revealed that the main difficulties reported by Japanese scientists when writing articles in English were lack of appropriate vocabulary to describe results and formulate claims, as well as the overuse of hedging expressions, attributable to both first language transfer and lack of confidence in their English-language proficiency. Despite the strategy of reading in order to improve writing skills, successful text reception was not an indicator of appropriate text production by Japanese research article writers. In addition, an indirect conclusion of this study would also be that the investigated Japanese researchers found the *Discussion* section most difficult to produce in English given their reported difficulty with staking claims and tendency to overhedge. Therefore, English language proficiency, text familiarity, including ability to use rhetorical strategies effectively, not only to recognize them, and solid background knowledge, which is required for carrying out original research in the first place are the most important prerequisites for international publication.

To conclude, this paper highlighted the intricate link between reading and writing for the purpose of creating knowledge in various academic settings, the intertextual nature of scientific texts, the importance of conducting reading and writing activities as members of specialized discourse communities, as well as some of the challenges that non-native academics face when engaging in international publication. However, the question of linguistic inequality and its possible consequences seem to have only generated partial answers that cannot be extrapolated to written academic discourse in general.

Moreover, given the lack of literature on the reading and writing practices of Romanian scientists, studies focusing on their pragmatic competence could prove beneficial for assessing the local situation and for suggesting future teaching approaches. In addition, further studies supported by quantitative and qualitative data are needed in order to establish wider

[35] Okamura 2006

local reading patterns and link them with writing trends. Such findings would be of tremendous relevance for the English for Specific Purposes specialists concerned with improving students' and young researchers' academic skills through specific targeted action.

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