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WRITING RESEARCH ARTICLES IN ENGLISH: PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE OF SERBIAN WRITERS

Abstract

As English has become the dominant language of academic communication, researchers around the world face an increased pressure to publish their results in English. Non-Anglophone writers generally face problems caused by differences in rhetorical or argumentative styles and inadequate understanding of academic writing and discipline-specific standards and requirements. This paper seeks to explore how writers from Serbia approach the demanding task of writing research articles in English. Applying a qualitative research design based on interviews conducted with a selected group of researchers and scholars from the University of Novi Sad, Serbia, this small-scale study analyses the socio-organizational, linguistic and strategic aspects of this process. Two research questions are addressed: what are the most common difficulties perceived by the researchers and what strategies are most often employed to solve the problems of writing research articles in English. The results are interpreted in terms of their potential application in developing courses in academic writing for young researchers.

Keywords: academic writing, English for Research Publication Purposes, research article, rhetoric, writing practices

1. Introduction

Scientific communication is conducted almost exclusively in English. At the same time, the scientific community is becoming more and more international and it now includes an increasingly large number of scientists and researchers who do not speak English as their first language. While the ability to communicate in this *lingua franca* has enabled scientists to gain access to a vast amount of literature and exchange information throughout the larger academic community, the dominance of English has also raised concerns about the dichotomy between the “centre” and the “periphery” (Canagarajah, 2002) and the ways this affects the academics who are non-native speakers of English.

Non-native speakers who want to participate in the wider academic community are frequently in a disadvantaged position. It has been pointed out (Uzuner, 2008; Lillis & Curry, 2010) that these researchers sometimes have problems with accessing relevant current literature and that some of them work with scarce resources, which augments the problem of writing in a second or foreign language for English medium publications. Nevertheless, these researchers are required to fulfill the criteria set by leading journals in their field, because the publication of one’s work in prestigious international journals is linked to academic promotions, rewards and research grants. The investigation into the process of writing research articles in English and, in particular the disadvantages, difficulties and obstacles that non-native English speakers may encounter, have recently received considerable attention. Salager-Meyer (2008) points out the discursive and non-discursive problems faced by researchers in developing countries and Flowerdew (2007) highlights the “immense difficulties” of periphery situated non-native speakers. Hanauer & Englander’s (2011) study, which is designed to measure the burden of writing in a second language, finds that writing research articles in English is perceived by non-native speakers as more difficult than writing in their first language and is the cause of increased dissatisfaction and anxiety. The heightened interest in problems associated with writing research articles in English has resulted in the creation of a specific field within EAP: English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP). This recently coined term refers to “a branch of EAP addressing the concerns of professional researchers and post-graduate students who need to publish in peer-reviewed international journals” (Cargill & Burgess, 2008: 75).

The research article (RA) has become the dominant form of writing in modern academia, and the genre which is most frequently used for the dissemination of scientific knowledge. The studies into the characteristics of RA indicate that this genre requires highly sophisticated linguistic skills and a careful balance of factual information and social interaction (Swales, 2004; Hyland & Shaw, 2016).

The study presented here aims to investigate how non-Anglophone researchers approach this demanding task. It aims to explore 1) how the scientists from the University of Novi Sad, Serbia perceive the task of writing research articles in English and 2) what strategies they employ in order to successfully meet the requirements for international publication.

2. Academic writing in L2

Academic writing is always a challenging task. Writing research papers and publishing them in prestigious international journals is additionally demanding for non-Anglophone scholars. They need to achieve adequate writing skills in English in relation to specialized terminology, correct use of grammar and other highly advanced language features. The studies related to academic writing have shown that non-native English speakers may lack the required scope of vocabulary and have problems with complex grammar and sentence structures or the appropriate use of modals and idiomatic expressions (Uzuner, 2008). Writing for research publication requires mastering highly sophisticated linguistic expression. Muresan & Perez-Llantada (2014) report that about a third of the Romanian scientists in their study had experienced language problems when submitting their articles for publication and required the help of language specialists. The respondents in this study also pointed out problems with “paucity of expression and knowing the subtleties of the language”. In that respect they are similar to Slovak, German and Spanish speakers from the studies of Kourilova, 1998; Gosden, 2003 and Pérez-Llantada, 2012 (as cited in Muresan & Perez-Llantada, 2014). Consequently, non-native speakers perceive research writing in English as a slow and tedious process which sometimes includes writing in their first language before translating into English (Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008), relying on English-speaking friends, colleagues and other “literacy brokers” (Lillis & Curry, 2010), and going through multiple revisions with results that are not always satisfactory to their authors (Hanauer & Englander, 2011).

The potential problems of non-native English speakers are not related solely to grammar and vocabulary. These speakers also need to have the appropriate rhetorical and argumentative skills as well as the necessary familiarity with the conventions of academic writing in a given discipline. Even for those who master the aspects of language such as grammar and vocabulary, “writing texts is not a straightforward matter” (Adel, 2002:4). Writing research articles requires higher communicative competence and assumes a careful balance between presenting factual information and interacting with the reader in a way which will ensure the acceptance of the writer’s position (Hyland, 2005). Research has indicated that non-native speakers’ articles sometimes fail to get published because of inadequate understanding of rhetorical characteristics of academic writing and discipline-specific standards (Martín-Martín, 2008; Lillis & Curry, 2010). Successful academic writing in English is related to achieving objectivity, responsibility and explicitness in writing and interacting with the text and the readers. The absence of these features in non-native speakers’ writing results in texts which sound inappropriate or “awkward” (Hanauer & Englander, 2011).

Non-Anglophone writers need to have the practical knowledge of how to present facts effectively, build appropriate argumentation, provide support for one’s claims or apply correct citation practice. These aspects of English academic writing may differ from the traditionally accepted practice in the authors’ first language. The cultural difficulties in this area have been the focus of numerous contrastive studies (Duszak, 1994; Mauranen, 1993; Mirović & Bogdanović, 2016; Pisanski Peterlin, 2005; Siepmann, 2006; Yakhontova, 2002). These studies have indicated differences in building academic argumentation and the writer-reader interaction in different languages. In particular, contrastive studies have shown that academic writing in Slavic languages differs from English academic writing in being less linear and showing a greater tendency towards syntactic complexity. At the same time, it uses fewer

hedging devices and may fail to establish the appropriate relationship between the writer and the reader.

Our present research focuses on the ability of Serbian researchers to overcome these cultural differences in their academic writing and to use adequate writing strategies which would result in RAs worthy of international publication.

3. Research design

The aim of the study was to establish whether Serbian researchers' perceptions of academic discourse reflect the norms of internationally accepted writing practice regarding rhetorical and interactive features of research articles. At the same time, the investigation was directed towards identifying the usual problems these researchers face while writing articles as well as the strategies they use to deal with the problems. Accordingly, two research questions were addressed:

1. How well do Serbian researchers perceive the standard elements of academic writing?
2. What strategies are employed to solve the problems in writing RAs in English?

In order to answer the above questions, a qualitative research design was applied in the study. Data gathering and analysis were performed by means of semi-structured interviews with six researchers from the University of Novi Sad. The interviewees' areas of research are all related to science and technology including biology (2 researchers), engineering (2), physics (1) and mathematics (1). The sample included both well- and less-experienced researchers whose number of published articles in English ranges from 4 to 60. All of the participants learnt English through their elementary and secondary education and, although they attended an English language course at the university, they did not receive any formal instruction in academic writing. The interview guide included four general questions (addressed to each interviewee):

- How do you perceive the process of writing RA in English?
- What conventions do you apply in writing?
- Describe your writing process.
- What difficulties do you encounter during the process and how do you cope with them?

To make the interviewees feel comfortable and at ease while answering the questions, the interviews were conducted in Serbian and after the process of transcription translated into English. The interviews took place at the institution where the participants worked and each lasted for approximately half an hour.

The process of data analysis was based on the principles of deductive reasoning as it included careful examination of the interviewees' responses and their classification into two general categories, Perceptions and Practice. The two categories were established prior to the content analysis and were aimed to provide the answers to the set RQs, i.e., the former category covering mainly the segments that answer the first RQ and the latter referring to the

information relevant for the second RQ. The Perception section focused on the extent of the participants' knowledge concerning the conventions of academic writing and, in particular, the structure of RAs. It also aimed to determine the participants' (perceived) ability to achieve explicitness, objectivity and responsibility in their writing, and to establish interaction with the reader using appropriate metadiscourse features. The second category (Practice) focused on the problems the participants identify in the process of writing RAs in their field and the strategies they reported using in order to solve them. Finally, the participants were asked to provide suggestions for potential novices in their field and to indicate what they consider to be useful advice for achieving good academic writing skills.

4. Results and Discussion

The results are presented in two large sections, one on Perceptions and the other on Practices, following the classification pattern applied in the analysis of data.

4.1. Perception of writing research articles in English

The results in this section are presented in relation to how participants generally perceive the process of writing RAs, their views on RA structure, the awareness of writing conventions, and the ways in which explicitness, responsibility, objectivity and interaction with the reader are achieved.

Attitudes towards writing RAs in English: One general tendency reported by all participants in this study is that they write articles almost exclusively in English. They do not express dissatisfaction or frustration because of writing in a foreign language nor do they feel that writing in their mother tongue would significantly facilitate their writing. On the contrary, some of them state that it is easier for them to write in English than in Serbian. In that respect these researchers seem to differ from, for example, the Romanian researchers in Muresan & Perez-Llantada (2014). The main reason for this perception is seen in English being the vehicle for accessing all relevant information in their field. In addition, all the participants mention that English language terminology defines all the key concepts in their field. As Participant 3 states:

P3: If I wrote in Serbian I would have to find the appropriate Serbian terms.

Participant 4 also emphasizes the role of terminology and describes a situation when she was supposed to present some of her research results in Serbian and struggled with the Serbian equivalents for the key concepts in her research field. Participant 6 describes a similar problem during the writing of her Ph.D. thesis (in Serbian):

P6: Writing in Serbian only makes things more difficult because I don't know how to translate all those terms.

Awareness of the characteristics of RAs: Although none of the participants in the study received instruction in academic writing or in writing research articles for international publication, their responses indicate that they see RA as a specific genre with its own characteristics. Participant 4, for example, makes the distinction between presenting research

results in a journal article and presenting them at a conference. In addition, the participants seem to have the idea that RAs in their field have certain distinctive characteristics which may not apply to research in other fields. This is reflected in the frequently used expression: “in my field”. In that respect, they reflect the accepted view that a RA has its own genre-specific characteristics but is also discipline-specific (Bhatia, 2002). The awareness of a particular structure of research articles in their fields is something these researchers learned early in their careers: this structure was pointed out to Participant 2 by his thesis supervisor, but other participants report that they have acquired this knowledge by reading other papers in the field.

The participants’ knowledge of RA structure is not only formal. Their answers indicate that they understand how certain elements of RA structure contribute to building argumentation and obtaining a convincing presentation of research results. In that respect, they demonstrate awareness of the role certain metadiscursive elements have in achieving the necessary interaction between the writer and the reader. In fact, their explanations for the presence of certain elements of metadiscourse in their writing echo those found in the literature (e.g. Hyland, 2005). Thus, talking about the use of evidentials in the literature review section, Participant 1 demonstrates his awareness of the role this part of RA has in positioning the author within their discourse community:

P1: I have to show that I’m familiar with what others have done and that my works represent a ‘significant contribution’ to the field.

The same idea is expressed by Participant 4:

P4: You have to show that you are aware of what other people are doing and that what you are doing is different... nobody’s doing the work that is a hundred times better than everybody else’s, so you have to convince them that you’re making a small step forward.

In addition to this, Participant 3, the most senior researcher in the study, notices that the literature review can also have a didactic function, educating and instructing those who are new to the field.

Talking about RA structure, all the participants also notice the standard practice of including a paragraph at the end of the introduction section which serves to indicate article structure and “guide the reader through the rest of the text” (Participant 4). Similarly, the participants realize the role of endophoric and frame markers as signaling words, as in this statement by Participant 1:

P1: They are used to help the reader.

As their mother tongue, Serbian, is regarded to be a less “reader responsible” language (Hinds, 1987) than English, these participants’ perceptions also indicate the awareness of cultural differences.

On the other hand, another important feature of RAs, interaction with the reader through the use of interactional metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005), seems to be limited in these researchers’ account of their writing process. Although it is now widely accepted that the writer-reader relationship plays a significant role in academic persuasion and contributes to knowledge-making in the disciplines (Hyland, 2005), variations in the extent to which this is present in

different disciplines have also been documented (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Tse, 2004). The differences can generally be explained along the line of “soft” vs “hard” sciences. The so-called hard sciences usually deal with quantitative analysis, where a limited number of controlled variables and explanations are based on clear criteria, thus leaving little room for the writer interpretation. The participants in our study, researchers in the area of engineering, science and mathematics, do not report significant use of expressions like hedges or boosters, aimed at directing the reader in their interpretation of author's work. They all share the opinion that they should avoid using hedging expressions because that would diminish the value of their results. As Participant 1 says:

P1: If I'm talking about the results of my work, then it is not good to say it might, it could be because then it means that I'm unsure in what I was doing.

Whereas in engineering the results are expected to be practically applied and confirmed, in mathematics the results are frequently binary: true or false. The participants, therefore, feel that using hedging “is not recommended”. Commenting on the use of the phrase “to the best of our knowledge” which we identified in one of his papers, Participant 2 correctly interprets hedging of this sort as being cautious and not overstating his claim. He adds that he would never use that sort of expression applied to his research results (this example was found in the Introduction section). This kind of attitude can be attributed to the fact that in the so-called hard sciences the authors rely on the authority of objectively verified results which should be obtained irrespective of the individual researchers.

Similarly, the participants find no place for boosters in their research articles. Participant 1, however, mentions that he sometimes needs to use boosters and attitude markers, such as “significant novelty”, in correspondence with reviewers so as to emphasize the contribution his research is making to the field and wonders whether he should introduce them in his RAs.

All participants express the same opinion regarding the use of the first person in their writing, namely that they never use the first person *I* and generally avoid using *we*. Participant 2 says:

P2: Sometimes you can't avoid using *we*, for example, when you want to compare what we did in relation to what others do, particularly in the Introduction.

Possessive *our* is considered acceptable in expressions like: “our system”, “our model”. However, all participants feel that using a passive structure to avoid the first person is preferable in academic writing. Similarly, they do not feel the need to engage with the reader or address them directly. “As you can see” is thus frequently rephrased using “as can be seen”. The participants report that they are often instructed to be impersonal; this is stressed by journal guidelines or suggested by reviewers. Their perceptions would thus seem to reflect the dominant practice in their academic disciplines.

The participants' observations about their writing practice suggest that they are aware that it reflects the conventions of academic writing in general or the standard practice in their field. They frequently justify their choices by mentioning common practice, journal guidelines or other conventions, such as those followed in IEEE publications.

It is interesting to notice that their attitudes toward adhering to conventions are not always the same. While Participant 3, the most senior researcher, feels that the authors have some

freedom in their writing and in particular in relation to language, Participant 2, who frequently expresses the awareness of conventions, says that he applies conventional practice in his writing but adds:

P2: "...whether I agree with this is another matter".

It is perhaps worth mentioning that this participant started learning English at the age of four, and is probably the most proficient in the group. This kind of comment, which is repeated in relation to different conventional elements, may suggest that at an advanced level of language proficiency authors feel that they should have more freedom in shaping the scientific *lingua franca* and influencing the norms of academic communication.

In general, the participants' perception on the structure of RAs, the use of writing conventions and the introduction of metadiscourse in their writing indicates the awareness of the need to achieve explicitness, responsibility and objectivity, the important characteristics of academic writing.

4.2. Writing practices

The results in this section are presented in relation to the most common problems and difficulties the participants report having experienced in RA writing, the strategies they employ to overcome such difficulties and, finally, possible solutions and advice they would give to young and inexperienced researchers.

As mentioned before, the participants do not express dissatisfaction with the fact that they have to write their RAs in English. They do, however, describe the process of writing in English as slower than writing in Serbian, (Participant 3), and their descriptions of the RA writing activities reflect additional concerns about the linguistic and stylistic demands imposed by writing in a foreign language. One of the participants (Participant 5) reports that early in her career she used to write first in Serbian and then translate into English. Generally, however, in describing their writing process the participants explain that it starts with making a first draft in English, e.g.

P4: I write in English from the start. I begin with an outline of what I want to say and I never translate (from Serbian into English).

As for the problems they face in relation to the language aspects, the participants mention stylistic problems which prevent them from achieving the desired precision, fluency and sophistication in their writing. Like their Romanian colleagues in Muresan & Perez-Llantada (2014) study, they struggle to find the desired synonyms and feel that they frequently have to repeat the same word. The feeling of frustration which stems from having insufficient vocabulary resources is expressed by Participant 5 whereas Participant 1 worries about their sentences having the same structure and sounding monotonous. Participant 3 is concerned about the traditionally problematic aspects of English grammar, such as the use of articles. These participants usually notice the problems when they reread the text and then try to find a suitable synonym or vary the sentence structure with the aim of improving their writing.

On the other hand, the authors also report other types of problems that they become aware of usually through comments made by their supervisors or reviewers. These problems are related to achieving clarity in the presentation of their ideas and the ability to build a convincing case and for that reason they have a more significant impact on the persuasive force of their RAs. One frequent problem is the lack of conciseness and effectiveness in writing, as reported by several participants:

P5: When I write, it's always too extensive.

P6: I've always had problems with summarizing.

P1: No matter what the scientific contribution may be, if it is not presented effectively it will not be published.

This type of problem can be related to their mother tongue (Serbian) and the general characteristics of writing in Slavic languages. In relation to English, academic writing in Slavic languages is usually described as being less linear, showing a greater tendency towards syntactic complexity and digressions, and generally nursing a "baroque" style of writing (Čmejkova 1996: 13).

In addition, the participants report problems with connecting ideas in the text. Sometimes it is just the search for the right linking expression (Participant 1), but it may also be related to more substantial problems with achieving cohesion between key elements and strengthening their argumentation when presenting their work in RAs, for example:

P6: That's always a problem, how to make connections in the text....how to connect the result with the introduction and discussion...

These types of problems seem to be less prominent with researchers in the areas where the structure of the research article and the ways of building argumentation are more strictly defined, such as mathematics and physics.

The fact that the participants seem to be aware of the problems suggests that they reflect on their writing process and approach to writing in a foreign language. As for the strategies they use in writing RAs, writing an outline at the beginning is again mentioned as a dominant strategy. In addition, these authors generally start from their results:

P5: I first finish the results, both their graphic representations and text and then I do the other parts.

After writing, they usually reread their articles to proofread them; they aim to improve their style by using more varied vocabulary or sentence structure, for example:

P1: You don't see it at first but later when I read my text I notice that sentences look alike. Then I try to change them.

Only Participant 2, who is the most fluent in English, states that when rereading the article he does not focus specifically on the language and would only do that if he had plenty of time before submitting it for publication.

Other researchers in the study, who are less fluent in English, seem to rely heavily on the strategy which Flowerdew (2007) terms “language re-use”, i.e., they use language segments from the published RAs in their field. Although this may be considered controversial, the researchers in this study view this as a legitimate strategy as it only involves borrowing lexical elements: e.g.

P4: This is not ‘copy-paste’ it only helps me how to write something.

P6: I sometimes use a sentence and change it to suit me.

P3: When I have a problem I try to find how others said that. Usually, it is related to terminology but sometimes I look at a sentence to see how they wrote that.

Sometimes solving linguistic problems involves the help of language specialists, although not all of the researchers in this group rely on using this kind of help on a regular basis. It is interesting that they refer to this as part of their learning process:

P4: Once I had my text proofread by a language specialist and then the two of us went through all the changes together and her explanations helped me a lot.

Participant 1 also seems to value this kind of help:

P1: It would be easier if I had an experienced person with me when I write, so I can ask them and they would explain: you can’t say that, you should say it like this, and give me the reason why.

With younger researchers, their supervisors and mentors seem to have an important role in helping them develop RA writing skills. Participant 6 mentions how her supervisor would use ‘track changes’ option when correcting her writing and would thus provide useful feedback for improving the language skills as well. Participant 4 reports frequent exchanges of drafts writing with the supervisors, who also correct her English. With others, it is usually the cooperation with colleagues which also involves the joint work on language aspects. It seems that various types of “literacy brokers” (Lillis & Curry, 2010) play a role in the participants’ writing.

Finally, referring to what sort of advice they would give to their younger colleagues on the basis of their experience in learning how to write RAs, all of them recommend that reading a number of articles in their field is the necessary prerequisite to writing. Participant 3 talks about “a pile of papers”, and Participant 2 recommends reading three articles a week. The possibility of getting help during the writing process is regarded as particularly useful and in that respect, the participants acknowledge the usefulness of a potential course in academic writing. They see it incorporated in a course that teaches scientific research methodology and think it would be best to offer it at the time when young researchers make their first attempts at publishing RAs in English.

5. Conclusion

The present study offers some useful insights into the process of writing RAs by Serbian experts and scholars with regard to the way they approach this task, the strategies they

employ to complete it successfully as well as how they perceive the whole writing process in general. The analysis of the transcribed interviews conducted with six researchers offers answers to the research questions set prior to the investigation. As for the first question, relating to how well Serbian researchers perceive the standard elements of this academic genre, it can be concluded that the interviewees are generally well aware of the standards and conventions of writing articles in English. This refers in particular to their awareness of the need to be explicit, responsible and objective in their writing. They have learned and adopted these standard features of academic writing through a self-teaching process, by continually reading the authentic material in their field and paying attention to the sources. The participants also seem to have a clear understanding of how the application of certain linguistic resources helps them achieve the intended effect of supporting the argumentation in their writing. A feature that the participants are less accustomed to is the interaction with the reader and the use of hedging and boosting devices.

The participants' responses are particularly valuable and important in respect to the second research question, relating to the problems they encounter in writing RAs and the strategies and solutions they employ for overcoming such problems. The recorded results shed light on some procedures and techniques that seem very useful for educating young researchers who are novices in the task of academic writing. Frequently reported problems are related to the lack of appropriate academic vocabulary and the interference from the syntactic complexity preferred in Slavic writing style. The strategies commonly applied to solving writing problems are: proofreading (e.g., to avoid repetition in vocabulary and syntax inaccuracies), the potentially controversial strategy of "language re-use" (Flowerdew, 2007), and social strategies which involve colleagues, supervisors and language specialists as "literacy brokers" (Lillis & Curry, 2010).

The Serbian researchers participating in this study share some of the problems documented in the studies of other researchers from the periphery or semi-periphery, e.g., Muresan & Pérez-Llantada (2014). They, too, report problems which stem from the inability to express themselves with the ease and sophistication of native speakers. However, they also show high-level awareness of the standards and norms applicable to their field of study, as well as the awareness of cultural differences between Serbian and English writing styles. Although they rely on following the established writing patterns when writing their RAs, we can say that, on the whole, the Serbian researchers from this small-scale study perceive themselves as full members of their research community. They do not seem to feel the burden of the dichotomy between more and less privileged writers, in terms of native and non-native English speakers. Instead of the distinction between native and non-native speakers, the experience of these researchers suggests that discipline and genre-based standards imposed by established researchers in the field represent a model to be followed by younger and less experienced writers. This fact should be considered in academic writing instruction as suggested by Tribble (2017). The writing strategies reported in this study show good pedagogical potential, as they could be implemented into academic writing courses at both national and international level. Further research in this area could focus more closely on the identification of the examples of good practice in writing research articles by non-native English authors.

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