Challenges of non-native English speaker international students on the written assignment in UK universities: a critical review of the recent empirical literature

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Abstract

As a written discourse between students and academic teaching staff, academic writing is fairly important for students in respect of their academic success or failure in higher education. In particular, it is a significant challenge to non-native international students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This study draws on the issues of non-native English speaker international students on the written assignment by reviewing previous empirical studies conducted in UK university context. The review undertaken here investigated two parties, international students and academic teaching staff. The findings showed that non-native international students had much trouble with limited linguistic resources, different socio-cultural education systems and lack of supports. The academic teaching staff showed lack of intercultural awareness by devaluing the multilingual and multicultural repertoires in written practices. Researchers argued academic lecturers make more efforts to accommodate them and provide enough writing supports; Also they suggested that they reconsider the non-native international students’ written tasks not as a problem to be fixed by standard English norm but as intercultural or transcultural repertoires.

Keywords: academic writing, international students, UK universities, academic teaching staff, intercultural communication, higher education

1. Background

As the second most popular academic destinations (the US being the most popular), the UK has progressed successfully in the internationalization of higher education in regard to high ranking global universities and high recruitment of international students from all over the world (HESA, 2017).[6] Furthermore, the population of international academic content teaching staff has increased along with the internationalization of UK higher education (henceforth, HE). In consequence, the scheme of internationalization has impact on the growth of a diverse linguacultural population; in particular, international students and teaching staff bring a rich range of multilingual and multicultural repertoires into UK academic settings so that

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intercultural communication in English has become the interlocutors' real life linguistic and cultural performance. Certainly, English is seen as a lingua franca to disseminate knowledge and academic cooperation. That is to say, using the international contact language, intercultural skills and awareness are crucial factors for successful mutual ineligibility. On the other hand, the project of internationalization has received criticism by barely recognizing the multilingual and multicultural actual academic norm. The international UK universities have paid little attention to intercultural support, and the harmonization between local and global academics at policy level, as if it is not worth the effort (Jenkins, 2014; Preece, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2011). [12][21][14] Allowing only mono-linguacultural spaces, the universities encourage a one side imposition of homogeneous discourses in written and spoken practices, through the top down approach (Kirkpatrick, 2011; De wit, 2012; Jenkins, 2014).[14][4][12] Accordingly, the local academics (i.e. native teaching staff and home students) do not have proper opportunities to promote intercultural awareness and communicative skills. Consequently, they tend to misunderstand the internationalization of university(e.g. homogenization, uniformity) and show defensive attitudes toward non-native encounters (Montgomery, 2008, 2010; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Jenkins, 2014; Hyland et al., 2008; Sovic et al, 2013; Tian & John, 2010).[20][19][22][12][10][23][27] As a result, the disjunction between monolingual ethos on the institutional level and multilingual practice on the ground have widened a significant gap; the potential rich multilinguacultures from non-native English speaker international students rarely receive a warm welcome; they face greater obstacles under explicit but tacit pressure with respect to intercultural communication. In regards to this, researchers have conducted plenty of empirical studies about intranational students; in particular, many studies have attempted to identify non-native international students' difficulties and urged to improve the current situation specifically in relation to written and spoken practices.

From these surrounding issues, present study investigates academic writing issues of non-native English speaker international students (henceforth, NNES ISs) in UK HE by reviewing previous studies. It would be worthwhile to take look at the ISs' academic writing experiences, because academic writing is considered as written discourse between ISs and their academic contents teaching staff. In addition, the written communication between these parties would be crucial to the NNES ISs' academic success or failure. As Gorska (2013: 191)[5] mentions, "this activity in itself is more than just putting words onto paper.". Therefore, this study focuses specifically on two aspects, the experiences of ISs and the perspectives of teaching staff with regard to written practices. However, literature on this subject in the UK
HE context is limited. Therefore, I review the relevant studies including other Anglophone HE contexts. I begin by outlining some general academic writing issues that the students identified as difficulties in UK HE. Secondly, the following study will address the essential differences and difficulties of NNES ISs, who are from different lingual cultural repertoires, with respect to English academic writing in Anglophone HE. Thirdly, NNES ISs' perceptions toward lecturers' awareness and skills in written discourse will be discussed. Finally, arguments from a critical pedagogical viewpoint that lecturers should reconsider the written practice concerning NNES ISs in order to improve the awareness and skills will be presented.

2. The extent and nature of the empirical literature

As a starting point, let me consider some points of Lea and Street’s (1998)[16] study. Even though Lea and Street (1998)[16] did not specify ISs issues, the study did investigate certain fundamental academic writing matters in British HE by examining the perceptions of lecturers and home students. These results from the study indicated that fixed approaches and homogeneous perspectives were adopted such as skills focused on the "educational judgements about good and bad writing" rather than on the "cultural and social practice" (Lea and Street, 1998: 158).[16] It was observed that there was inconsistency in the writing rules (e.g. conventions, styles, lecturers' feedbacks, etc.) regarding different disciplines and modules as well as with respect to each lecturer. For example, "in history, the use of evidence is particularly important, or in English, we are looking for clarity of expression"(ibid: 161),[16] as if the academic writing for students is "a kind of game, trying to work out the rules, not only for a field of study, a particular course or particular assignment but frequently for an individual tutor" (ibid: 163).[16] Furthermore, the lecturers themselves did not seem to know exactly how students could go about the execution of proper academic writing. In one interview, a lecturer responds "I know a good essay when I see it but I cannot describe how to write it" (ibid: 159).[16] Consequently, Lea and Street (1998)[16] argue in these circumstances, that the task of writing is an utmost challenge for students such that:

This emphasis on identities and social meanings draws attention to deep affective and ideological conflicts in such switching and use of the linguistic repertoire. A student’s personal identity who am ‘I’ - may be challenged by the forms of writing required in different disciplines, notably prescriptions about the use of impersonal and passive forms as opposed to first person and active forms, and students may feel threatened and resistant - ‘this isn’t me’. (Lea and Street, 1998: 159)[16]

That is to say, academic writing is a significant aspect even to home students. In this respect,
it could be assumed that academic writing in English is an incredible challenge to NNES ISs from different linguacultures in UK universities.

Before moving to the research of ISs' perceptions toward the written intercultural communication skills of lecturers, two aspects of the ISs' general differences and the difficulties as NNESs (non-native English speakers) to do academic writing tasks should be addressed: The first is the lack of linguistic resources and the second is the education systems based on different socio-linguacultures. The linguistic resources (e.g. academic conventions) and the abilities of the students (e.g. size of vocabulary, grammar proficiency, spelling accuracy, etc.) are essentially very different between NNES ISs and home students. With regard to English vocabulary, the proverbial "essential building block of language", Schmitt et al. (2001: 55)[26] reported that ISs had a narrower bulk of words than those of native English speaker students through a vocabulary level test in a UK university. In this study, a total of 106 NNES international student participants were from 13 different countries including France, Germany, Spain, Malaysia, Japan and China. According to Schmitt et al. (ibid).[26] native English speakers are considered to have on average 40,000 word-size vocabularies whereas, NNESs are considered have ones consisting of only 10,000 words on average. In addition, Schmitt (2006: 66)[25] also indicated that the strict plagiarism rule applied to ISs is an "imprecise concept with ill-defined boundaries". As a result, it can be deduced that there is an overwhelming pressure on the NNES students regarding the "ownership of words to individual writers" (ibid).[25]

Concerning the issues presented by differences in socio-lingualcultures, Holmes (2005)[9] Wu & Hammond (2011)[29] and Liu (2013: 136)[18] demonstrated that there were specific difficulties prone to Asian ISs due to the different academic literacies between their home countries and western countries. Holmes (2005)[9] in a New Zealand context, reported that ethnic Chinese ISs from Confucian dialectic pedagogic systems struggled with the unfamiliar western dialogic writing styles, such as expressing their own critical opinions, creative and original approaches, and comparison and contrastive analyses. In particular, the ISs indicated that lecturers' feedback was vague and inadequate, and thus, not helpful in terms of improvement or overcoming linguistic obstacles. This is exemplified in the ISs comment below: "Normally they [teachers] just give a grade. Some will say, "your discussion is hard to follow," or sometimes they will say, "Very good, interesting argument," They don't really say how you should approach, so I just try and experiment." (Holmes, 2005; 305).[9] Hence, ISs preferred
more specific instructional feedback as a guideline. Likewise, Wu & Hammond (2011) [29] displayed how the academic writing was the biggest challenge for East Asian ISs at master's level in a UK university. In particular, Liu (2013: 136) [18] analysed the different writing patterns and evaluation systems between China HE from interviews with 12 undergraduate level Chinese students in a business school. Liu reported that the Chinese way of writing focused on "the structure and depth of knowledge", whereas the UK method focused on the "flexible application of the knowledge and creativity of the student".

Extending the scope of this study, Bailey(2013) [2] provided an overview of the academic writing difficulties and complexity issues of NNES ISs from various countries in a UK university by interviewing NNES ISs in undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In the findings, ISs addressed somewhat different issues according to their nationalities. For example, ISs from India and Nigeria were uncomfortable with the length of writing and with information literacy. The main difficulties on average that should this be a particular demographic NNES ISs identified were 'observing the academic writing conventions' (e.g. paraphrasing, avoiding plagiarism, etc.), 'using an appropriate style', 'checking for accuracy', 'writing at length', 'finding sources', 'reading in a foreign language', and 'structuring a text'. These reflective comments demonstrated the ISs' difficulties in adjusting to the British system and often depended on the nationality of the ISs, which can be observed in the statements below:

"Plagiarism is a very serious problem in West, especially in the University … In fact, plagiarism is not a serious problem in China, because—most people haven’t concept of plagiarism. I always copy information on Internet and books without reference when I study in China.” - Chinese student (ibid: 179)[2]

"The composition of academic sentences was not easy as it was confusing me with the structuring sentences on my home language, what was as result non-understandable and sometime without making sense writing in English” - Cypriot (ibid.)[2]

"The Arabic method of writing an essay is extremely different from the English method of writing an essay, in the Arabic method we put general introduction about the title, and then in the body, which is the core of the essay, we talk about the title in one long paragraph, and then come the conclusion. While in the English method the introduction is very important because it contains a work plan, moreover it mention points about what the body will talk about, the body is very important too it contains paragraphs, each paragraph explain the points that was mentioned in the introduction, then come the conclusion.” - Syrian (ibid: 178)[2]

As revealed from the aforementioned studies, even if the multilingual and multicultural student bodies have extended in the academic circumstances and the NNES ISs have increased
Challenges of non-native English speaker international students on the written assignment in UK universities: a critical review of the recent empirical literature

their intercultural awareness, there is still only one suggested way to follow, that is, the NNES ISs should accept the Anglophone norms of written discourse in order to succeed in their academic courses. In this regard, Brown and Joughin (2007)[3] claim that:

When students from particular cultural contexts consistently experience problems with assessment, we need to consider the role that culturally based factors may be playing and respond to these appropriately. This calls for an awareness of and respect for other assessment cultures and a realization that our local culture is not the only one, nor necessarily the best. (Brown and Joughin, 2007: 70)[3]

Now, the focus turns to the main topic at hand: what NNES ISs experienced with lecturers through written discourse, and in doing so, how they perceived lecturers’ intercultural communication skills. First, Gór ska (2013)[5] investigated 12 NNES ISs’ perspectives in a British pre-master’s program by examining interviews, observations of writing classes and collections of ISs’ papers. The participants already had experienced academic writing during their undergraduate courses in UK universities. In the interviews, ISs indicated that the content lecturers did not provide enough support, as if the content lecturers considered that additional writing help would be too much of a guide and not a necessary duty. Therefore, ISs generally perceived the adoption of adjustment to the UK academic literacy patterns as their own responsibility.

Yeh and Yang (2003)[30] Hennebry et al (2012),[11] Jenkins (2014),[12] Trahar (2011),[28] and Jenkins et al. (1993)[13] all reported the NNES ISs’ perceptions toward the lecturer’s evaluation in this manner. For instance, Yeh and Yang (2003)[30] reported that the 12 NNES Asian ISs wished that the lecturers’ content focused on evaluation rather than linguistic ability because it would be fair treatment for NNES in comparison with home students. Also, they wanted lecturers to be more aware of how the English writing was difficult to NNES ISs and to recognize for their efforts concerning this.

Similarly, Jenkins (2014)[12] discussed the fairness between home students and NNES ISs by examining both ISs and teaching staff in a UK context. In this study, NNES ISs described their English writing as “a different game” from the home students; they indicated that they needed more time than home students for writing tasks (ibid: 181-2).[12] This is because they should pay heed to linguistic accuracy in accordance with the normative ENL forms as well as knowledgeable content makeup during the same amount of time given for home students. In addition, most native English speaker teaching staff seemed to be unaware that ISs were from different L1 writing systems. After an interview with native English speaker lecturers in a UK
university, Jenkins reported that the lecturers ‘take for granted’ the native English varieties, having the attitude that:

“They are in the UK now, so must follow UK universities’ ways of doing things: native English speakers cannot (a couple now, so must follow UK universities’ ways of doing things: native English speakers cannot (a couple said “should not have to”) change, and non-native English speaker students “cannot change the environment” so must change themselves.” - an academic teaching staff (Jenkins, 2014: 188)[12]

Hennebry et al.’s (2012)[11] study also examined both ISs and teaching staff in a UK context by conducting a questionnaire survey and sub-sample interview on 43 postgraduate level NNES ISs and 6 content teachers in one department. In the findings, ISs mainly reported that the lecturers’ strict writing evaluations according to normative Standard English made the NNES ISs nervous in conveying their own ideas when they did writing tasks, as exhibited by one student’s comment:

“I’m so much afraid that I may fail because of my level of academic writing…Ok. Maybe I have some ideas, and I think they are valuable, I don’t know how to put them…small things like grammar or articulation…something that can actually affect the whole picture” - an International student (ibid: 220)[11]

In concordance, half of the participants reported that lecturers’ feedback on written work was not adequate. However, ISs who struggled with the unfamiliar western academic writing rules and conventions (e.g. sentence structure, NE-like fluency and clarity, etc.) tended to blame their lacking English abilities as the reason to not be able to follow postgraduate work. In fact, 29 students responded that their lecturers suggested to them to get proofreading to correct their writings. It should be noted that ISs explicitly wanted the lecturers not to “expect lower academic standards” but “a certain degree of tolerance of grammatical errors” and to have content-focused assessment rather than native-like linguistic accuracy (ibid: 221)[11]

From the lecturers’ standpoints, they seemed to be aware that NNES ISs generally did not have comprehension problems in lectures, but that academic writing might prove to be a significant challenge to NNES ISs. Overall, content lecturers showed negative views toward the NNES ISs’ written work by means of comparison with of home students. For example, home students had general structural matters, such as entire argument flow and the way of idea organizing, whereas, NNES ISs were problematic with both aspects, that is, structure and language ability. Accordingly, lecturers tended to regard the NNES ISs’ writing works as deficient written products to be polished by proofreading, and thus, indicated that remedial writing supports were needed for them. Also, in research by Trahar (2011)[28] and Jenkins
Challenges of non-native English speaker international students on the written assignment in UK universities: a critical review of the recent empirical literature

(2014),[12] the lecturers' normative linguistic assessment and paradoxical Standard English beliefs were reported in a UK context. Interestingly, Jenkins(2014)[21] revealed that in a comparison between American and British HE, the native English speaker lecturers' perceptions considered each other's English abilities to be non-standard. For instance, in Trahar(2011),[28] one American international student's comment may show how lecturers tend to define the so-called 'standard English' in a UK university in terms of written discourse with ISs:

"At one of my early supervisions, my supervisor told me that I must write my thesis using British English. Both of these situations made it clear that I was a speaker of 'different' English and mine was not the correct one. A defence against American hegemony perhaps?" (Trahar, 2011: 32)[28]

In the above aforementioned studies, the described academic circumstances through the NNES ISs' perspectives raise essential questions concerning the meaning of the 'international use' of English and the 'internationalization' of HE.

Of particular interest are findings from Jenkins et al(1993),[13] which showed the lecturers' different ways of assessment in a US context. Lecturers focused on clear content rather than grammatical aspects. This study was conducted by emailing 600 questionnaires to graduate Engineering faculties in three universities where 31% (188) were returned. The findings showed that lecturers evaluated the NNES ISs' writing tasks with different standards from that for the home students'. For example, lecturers emphasized that the NNES ISs' worked more on 'presenting ideas in an organized way', and the 'quality of content', rather than on 'grammar/sentence structure', 'appropriate vocabulary', 'punctuation and spelling', and 'overall writing ability' (ibid: 57).[13] Seemingly, the lecturers showed that the NNES ISs' grammatical mistakes were not considered a major issue; however, this did not change the fact that the lecturers perceived the NNES ISs' writing skills as deficient and problematic, eliciting comments such as 'poor writer', 'much more worse', and 'generally worst'. In addition, the lecturers were dissatisfied that they should spend more evaluation time on evaluating NNES ISs' written work compared to home students. To support this argument, the lecturers responded that the NNES ISs could get the appropriate writing aid from writing experts or proofreading services, and that after finishing the course, the ISs might return to their home countries where the usage of English may be infrequent. Similar to the findings of Lea and Street (1998),[16] the lecturers could not demonstrate clearly what good writing skills were explicitly and how to guide the NNES ISs efficaciously.
In summary, this study addressed the main academic writing issues through the perspectives of both the NNES ISs and lecturers. Considering all the research issues previously discussed, the main points with respect to my study are as follows: The first is the lectures’ strict right or wrong evaluation, which focused on the surface linguistic forms according to particular linguacultural codes, where, specifically, the weight of content intelligibility will be considered; the second is the overall lecturers’ problematic point of view toward the NNES ISs’ writings by devaluing the multilingual and multicultural repertoires presented on their written works; and lastly, the lecturers’ unarticulated feedback and lack of writing instruction, which exacerbates the NNES ISs’ academic situation, will be investigated. The studies’ findings reveal that despite the huge increase in the IS body, there appears to be no progression toward a sustainable positive integration, but rather a stagnation to maintain “Standard written English”, thereby penalizing and deterring the NNES ISs’ diverse and creative written texts in the UK and among Anglophone international HE. In fact, the demands of the NNES ISs regarding lecture instruction and sensitivity are deemed reasonable and simple such that it could be implemented by providing more content focused evaluation, instructive feedback and writing guidance, as well as more patience and understanding with respect to general pedagogical attitudes. However, with respect to the NNES ISs, the matter of adjustment/adaptability and the ability to fail or succed in the academic written discourse seems to lie mainly on their responsibility. Schmitt(2006)[25] points out that only in the Standard English academic circumstance, the NNES ISs’ own various linguacultural repertoires on their academic writings are treated as pragmatic errors rather than being respected as creativities. She suggests that “as our student body internationalizes, we may also need to consider whether it is the academy that needs to shift its views of what constitutes good writing”(ibid: 66).[25] Also, Jenkins (2014)[12] claims native English speaker lecturers needs to make more efforts to adopt the way NNES ISs use English in their writing by developing intercultural awareness and skills in English as a lingua franca in academic settings. In this regard, Horner et al’s (2011, Also see Horner et al, 2011)[8][7] translilingual approach would provide practical ways to improve awareness and skills in written intercultural communication. It is based on the practice of meaning negotiation and accommodation through the multilingual and multicultural written texts of the writers in hybrid genres. Horner et al(2011)[8] who argues against the ‘taken for granted’ monolithic Standard English ideology (such as the notion of the Standard English speaker), and standard written English, state that:

It recognized the logicality of all varieties of English, the meanings to be gained by speakers and writers in using particular varieties of English, and the right of speakers and writers to produce such meanings […]
Challenges of non-native English speaker international students on the written assignment in UK universities: a critical review of the recent empirical literature

asks of writing not whether its language is standard, but what the writers are doing with language and why. (ibid: 304-5)[8]

Furthermore, standard written English and its corresponding demands are often unfair in multilingual and multicultural academic settings for students using English as a lingua franca. Academic teaching staff have to be more aware of the nature of language norms which is actually heterogeneous, fluid, and negotiable, and therefore, the various repertoires are not defective barriers to be polished but resources for producing creative meanings in the NNES Is’ writings. By doing so, the lecturers’ translingual standpoints and approaches could encourage the NNES Is’ various linguacultural repertoires in English as a lingua franca in academic settings.

3. Conclusion

Having given these consideration, researchers suggest good English writing be feasible to positively and effectively integrate international intelligibility for all readers, regardless of the writer’s native or non-native statues based on comprehensible content. Hence, it is recommended that academic teaching staff in international universities improve intercultural awareness, strategies and tolerance for the sake of effective written discourse with non-native international students in English as a lingua franca. However, past studies reviewed in this paper reported mainly international students’ experiences with native English speaker teaching staff and the teaching staff’s perspectives. Also other studies, it was unknown whether the lectures were native or non-native English speaker. Therefore, further research in this area is suggested to investigate more precisely the teaching staff’s awareness including both native and non-native teaching staff and whether there are any significant differences or similarities between them in terms of written practices with international students. In spite of the limitation, these findings presented in the past studies would provide a backdrop to research as important points and resonate with other researchers’ or readers’ experiences in different international academic contexts.

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Challenges of non-native English speaker international students on the written assignment in UK universities: a critical review of the recent empirical literature


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