The challenges faced by L2 postgraduate thesis writers and their self-initiated writing strategies

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Postgraduate students’ academic success hinges on the quality of their thesis writing. However, writing at this level is a complex and challenging task for second language writers and writing teachers at the tertiary level are constantly seeking for ways to help them. This paper reports on a longitudinal study which investigated ESL postgraduate students’ major writing problems and the self-initiated strategies that they developed to meet these challenges, as well as the role played in students’ writing development by their supervisors’ feedback and their language support programmes.

Nine case study students from a range of disciplines were interviewed four times at different stages during their doctoral programme and a questionnaire was sent to over 150 postgraduate students. The findings suggested that students’ writing challenges related mainly to linguistic, cultural, institutional and disciplinary issues. In particular two main difficulties were identified: difficulties with expressing complex ideas in a second language and difficulties with developing confidence and a convincing academic voice as students attempted to make the transition from novice to expert members of the academic community.

The paper discusses the range of self-initiated strategies students developed to deal with their writing challenges. One widely reported strategy was the use of academic articles as writing ‘models’. The case study students’ focus when using such texts was dynamic and changed as their writing skills and knowledge of their research area evolved. Another important strategy was the use of peer support networks for providing support, advice and feedback on writing.

This paper will also focus on the implications of the study for both academic writing teachers and for teachers acting as supervisors to second language postgraduate students.