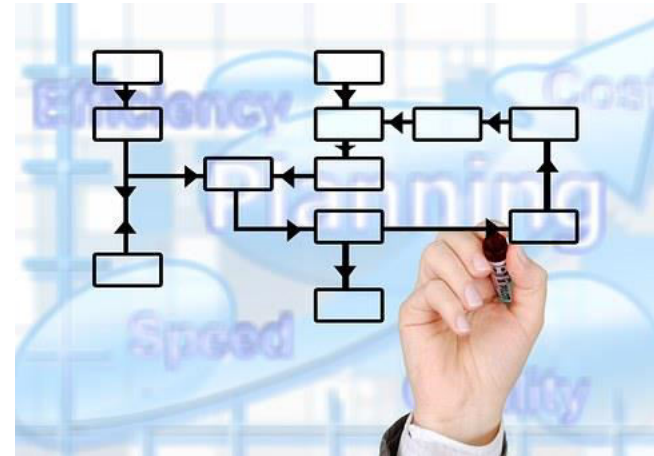# Academic writing support for EAL PhD candidates: What works and the way forward

Lai Ping Florence Ma

Outline

1. Background of project
2. Literature review
3. Method
4. Findings
   - Faculty-based workshops
   - Writing groups
   - Student preferences for support
5. Recommendations for support services

Background

Doctoral students

- unprepared for discipline-specific conventions
- various language support services
- member of discourse community (Flowerdew, 2000; Maher *et al.*, 2014)

EAL doctoral students

- write thesis in L2
- argumentation and coherence (Benfield & Howard, 2000; Curry & Lillis, 2004)
- more time and effort (Flowerdew, 1999; Kwan, 2013)

Literature review

Writing groups	'small groups of people who come together regularly to share and discuss writing' (Gere, 1987)
Aitchison (2009)	• How and what kinds of learning occur
Li & Vandermensbrugghe (2011)	• Issues and challenges
Dwyer *et al.* (2012)	• Productivity and emotional support
Guerin (2013)	• Benefits and effects
Aitchison & Guerin (2014)	• Practice and theory
Wilmot (2016)	• Improvement in writing practices • Group composition • Future improvement

Study

Aim of study

- collect student feedback on language support services
- identify learning needs and preferences
- provide recommendations for improvement

Research questions

- What language support services have you used?
- Do you find the services useful? Why/why not?
- How can the services be improved?

Method

Participants

- 26 EAL doctoral students
- 10 males 16 females
- 13 languages
- 5 faculties
- 11 English as Medium of Instructions in UG/PG

Method

- semi-structured interviews
- transcription and content analysis

Findings

- on workshops and writing groups

Method

Research site

- 4 HDR learning advisers
- Main responsibilities:
  - writing course for master's students
  - 6-8 weeks faculty-based workshops (twice per year)
  - writing groups
  - 3-day writing retreat (per year + embedded 1:1)
  - 1:1 consultations

Findings - Workshops

Positive comments

- basic but useful for first year
  - overall thesis structure
- useful writing tips

Findings - Workshops

Negative comments

- timing
  - have no findings to report
  - needs writing experience to gain benefits
  - not tailored to needs
  - attend in second and third year – too late
- paragraph structure not practical for thesis writing

Findings - Workshops

Divided opinions on peer feedback

- helpful from students in other disciplines

' … so in this group even we discuss whether your draft or paper is understandable for the person who is not very academic in your area. So in this way I think I have (the) opportunity to amend my own writing style so it's **understandable for different readers** from different backgrounds, not only from my background, because in urban planning it's combination of geography, land use planning, transportation planning, and infrastructure planning, but it's **not every people (everybody) is specific in every field in housing.**'

(S21, Urdu, Geography and Planning)

Findings - Workshops

Divided opinions on peer feedback

- unhelpful from students in other disciplines

*'Sometimes we showed our writing to friends or colleagues in your class. **I don't understand.** I read someone's writing in Maths. It's too difficult. **How are they going to be useful?** .. I can't read chemistry stuff because I'm not a chemist. When the people in the community, when they read it, they would know. "Oh, I see what you mean." …... For me, when I read the chemistry formula, I don't know what it means.'*

(S7, Thai, Computer Science)

Findings - Workshops

Suggestions from participants

- longer workshops
- workshops for first year students
  - set writing goals
  - tips on time management for writing
  - different workshops for thesis and article writing
  - deal with reviewers' feedback
- department-specific workshops

Findings – Writing groups

Mode
- groups formed within workshops
- student-initiated groups

Reason for joining
- no good at writing
- supervisor suggestion

Reason for not joining
- prefer to work alone

'I wanted to join a group, but at the end I didn't, … because it's useful to work with people but after a level I have the need… need to work on my own.'
(S16, Greek, International Studies)

Findings – Writing groups

Why are writing groups useful?

1. Getting feedback

'… when I was in China, I was trained in the Chinese Department, so lots of style and structure are quite different. Since I came here, I am a PhD student and **I don't have any class** to teach me how to write English thesis. So like **this working group like the first time they told me how to** … you shouldn't have written like this instead … introduction should (be) like this and then you should touch on analysis and then you should give some theories and you should combine them together. So this is the first time I know this is the right way to do it, which I cannot have this kind of workshop when I was in my first year.' (S23, Mandarin, English Literature)

*grouped with 2 other students supervised by the same supervisor

Findings – Writing groups

2. Relaxed atmosphere

*'First of all, **the atmosphere was very relaxed**. **You deal with your peers** and then what I found useful is the fact that I could read critically .. critically from a sense from the viewpoint of evaluation, the actual quality, in other slightly different disciplines. There were a few others but we were in the same faculty.' (S11, Italian, Linguistics)*

*' … like sometimes **supervisors are too busy** to give you detailed advice and like in this peer-review activity, **I don't feel like pressured. I'm not afraid to ask stupid questions,** like and so I feel more easy they just give me (feedback) from methodology to grammar, to format to structure like all included.' (S23, Mandarin, English Literature)*

Student preferences for language support

- regular, long-term, and continual
- longer hours, prefer morning and early afternoon
- generic → discipline specific
- group settings → personal

Resources???
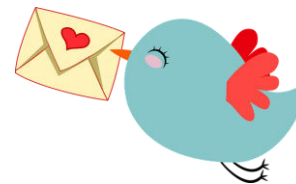
Recommendations

Beginning stage

- generic workshops or faculty-based workshops
- peer feedback from other disciplines
- 1:1 to identify issues

Later stage

- writing groups
- peer-feedback from same or similar discipline
- start writing on their own
- 1:1?

florence.lai.ma@mq.edu.au

References

Aitchison, C. (2009). Writing groups for doctoral education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (8), 905-916.

Aitchison, C. & Guerin, C. (2014). *Writing groups for doctoral education and beyond: Innovations in practice and theory.* London & New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

Benfield, J. R. & Howard, K. M. (2000). The language of science. *European Journal of Cardio-thoracic Surgery*, 18, 642-648.

Curry, M. J. & Lillis, T. (2004). Multilingual scholars and the imperative to publish in English: Negotiating interests, demands, and rewards. *TESOL Quarterly*, 3 (4), 663-688.

Dwyer, A. Lewis, B. McDonald, & Burns, M. (2012). It's always a pleasure: Exploring productivity and pleasure in a writing group for early career academics. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 34 (2),129-144.

Flowerdew, J. (1999). Problems in writing for scholarly publication in English: The case of Hong Kong. *Journal of Second language Writing*, 8 (3), 243-264.

Flowerdew, J. (2000). Discourse Community, Legitimate Peripheral Participation, and the Nonnative-English-Speaking Scholar. *TESOL Quarterly, 34*(1), 127–150.

References

Gere, A. (1987). *Writing groups: History, theory, and implications*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Guerin, C. (2013). Rhizomatic research cultures, writing groups and academic researcher identities. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 8, 137-150.

Kwan, B. S. C. (2013). Facilitating novice researchers in project publishing during   the doctoral years and beyond: A Hong Kong-based study. *Studies   in Higher Education*, 38 (2), 207-225. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2011.576755

Li, L. & Vandermensbrugghe, J. (2011). Supporting the thesis writing process of international research students through an ongoing writing group. *Innovations   in Education and Teaching International*, 48 (2), 195-205.

Maher, M., Feldon, D. F.,Timmerman, B. E., & Chao, J. (2014). Faculty perceptions   of common challenges encountered by novice doctoral writers,   *Higher   Education Research & Development*, 33 (4), pp. 669-711.

Wilmot, K. (2016). Designing writing groups to support postgraduate students' academic writing: A case study from a South African university, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, DOI: 10.1080/14703297.2016.12398775

florence.lai.ma@mq.edu.au