Writing the Literature Review: Challenges of Two Mexican Novice Writers

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Introduction

Writing a thesis or dissertation is not an easy task (Bitchener, 2009; O'Connell & Jin, 2001; Meloy, 2002); this kind of writing may also represent a particularly more difficult endeavor when it comes to novice writers who also happen to be non-native speakers of English (NNS) who can struggle not only with the linguistic demands but also with the characteristics of its discourse of this genre\sub-genre.

Yet the literature review (LR), as one of the sections that represents a major difficulty for students when writing their theses, has received little attention (Boote & Beile, 2005; Bruce, 1994; Meloy, 2002). Among the difficulties faced by students is the need for evaluating sources that support the research in their writing. From this perspective, we propose to analyze the various ways in which Mexican undergraduate students evaluate (in terms of stance and engagement) what they read when writing the LR in English. The study adopts a mixed model approach as it involves interviews with these undergraduates as well as the qualitative-quantitative analysis of the LRs. From the findings, it seems that although evaluation of the sources by the participants does take place—as found in the interviews—the students do not express any critical views of their sources in their writing. As for the type of evaluation in the LR's, this is predominantly not epistemic. Interestingly, the nature of the evaluation in the LRs seems not only related to the struggle for developing authorial identity, but also to the interpretations of the instruction both participants received.

Writing the literature review at the undergraduate level

Academic writing has long been considered a difficult skill for non-native speakers of English (see Cheng, 2013; Stapleton, 2002; Silva, 1990) as it not only implies knowledge of the language (linguistic knowledge), but also awareness of the academic conventions and rhetorical structure of texts and the context where texts are constructed (situational and contextual knowledge). In

short, students need to meet the expectations of the discourse community (Swales, 1990) they are trying to enter. All that said, this complex long-term activity already difficult to native speakers poses obvious additional challenges to the non-native ones (Cheng, 2013).

The nature of the academic text to be produced is also a contributing factor in the level of difficulty posed for the NNS. Writing a thesis or dissertation is not an easy task for native speakers (Bitchener, 2009; O'Connell & Jin, 2001; Meloy, 2002) but clearly more so for non-native speakers of English. As Paltridge (2002) argues, thesis and dissertation writing is a difficult process for native speaker students and often doubly so for non-native speaker students. ESL students may have the level of language proficiency required for admission to their course of study, but not yet have the necessary textual knowledge, genre knowledge, and social knowledge required of them to succeed in this particular setting. Furthermore, they often have to write their thesis or dissertation without access to sample texts to draw on as models for their writing (Paltridge, 2002, p.137). Bitchener (2009) also states that students need to be aware of the rhetorical structure of the thesis as he claims that, "writing an empirically based thesis or dissertation for the first time, be it at honours, masters or doctoral level, requires a clear understanding of what is expected or required for each of its part-genres sections or chapters" (p. 1).

Writing a thesis may be for many students their first formal writing research task. Thus, students may be uncertain about what the purpose of the thesis is. According to Bitchener (2009), this difficulty can often mean that students are also unclear about (1) what content should or should not be presented, (2) how the content can be most effectively organized so that maximum rhetorical effect is achieved, (3) which linguistic features typically characterize how claims and appropriate interpretations are made, and (4) disciplinary-specific presentational conventions (p.1). It seems then that students need to be aware of not only the rhetorical structure of the thesis but most importantly what its communicative purpose is as well as what type of thesis they are expected to write so they meet the expectations of their institutions as there is often considerable variation in expectations across disciplines, fields of study, (and indeed supervisors), in terms of what a thesis or dissertation should look like (Dudley-Evans, 1999; Thompson, 1999).

Why the literature review?

The literature review plays a very important role in every research. Theses are not an exception. Ridley (2007) is well aware of the importance of the literature review as she claims that "the 'literature review' is the part of the thesis where there is extensive reference to related research and theory in your field; it is where connections are made between the source texts that you draw on and where you position yourself and your research among these sources" (p.2).

Writing the literature review implies the analysis and synthesis of previous studies as well. As stated by Turner and Bitchener (2008), "writing a literature review involves a synthesis of a complex range of analytical and rhetorical skills as well as academic writing skills, and an understanding of what is meant by critical analysis and argument" (p.1).

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Evaluation in the LR

In recent years evaluation has been studied as an attempt to understand the ways that writers and speakers convey their feelings and assessment in addition to propositional content (Conrad & Biber, 2000). Evaluation is not an easy concept to define and research has been carried out using different terms. For example, Hunston and Thompson (2000) use the term *evaluation* to refer to the writer's judgments, feelings, or viewpoint about something. Halliday (1994) uses the word *attitude*, Biber and Finegan (1998) and Hyland (2005) refer to *stance*; Martin (2000) uses *appraisal* and *voice*.

Hyland (2005) states that

> Evaluation is always carried out in relation to some standard. Personal judgments are only convincing, or even meaningful, when they contribute to and connect with a communal ideology or value system concerning what is taken to be normal, interesting, relevant, novel, useful, good, bad, and so on. (p.175)

Writers' evaluative resources are made as a result of the interaction with the other and what they make of the world. The presence of this interaction is evident in texts in a number of different ways. Hyland's model (2005) serves the purpose of finding evidence of evaluation as it embraces both stance and engagement. The first one includes features referring to how the writers present themselves and in doing so express judgment, opinion, and commitment (Hyland, 1999, 2002, 2005). *Engagement*, on the other hand, is that particular way in which writers establish a connection with their audience, and in doing so, establish themselves as authors (Hyland, 2001).

Research on the difficulties NNS face when writing their LR seems to not only be scarce (Boote & Beile, 2005; Bruce, 1994; Meloy, 2002), but also focuses on papers written at graduate level. Akindele (2008) for example, looked into the difficulties faced by graduate students undertaking their masters at the University of Botswana. The study, though not related to the particular population that this papers looks at, is interesting in that the focus was to "examine the problems which postgraduate students may have in evaluating literature critically in their writing" (p. 3). The results in Akindele's (2008) study point to general success in summarizing and relating information but draws on issues regarding the lack of skills to evaluate sources:

> At best, most of the students could only summarize and indicate the strengths of the literature reviewed but failed to point out their weaknesses and the need to improve on such studies. Therefore, most of the graduate students lack critical thinking skills and they were unable to assert their identity and voice in their writing. (p.11)

As for one of the underlying reasons behind the findings that emerged from the analysis of the LR's in this research, Akindele (2008) found that postgraduate students were reluctant to "risk making appropriate criticism" as this meant they would have to be convinced that expressing both positive and negative evaluation of other researcher's work is something acceptable .

A different study about the literature review is the one by Kwan (2006), who analyzed the structure of rhetorical argument at the level of moves, steps and strategies in order to characterize the rhetorical moves in LR chapters of 20 PhD theses in applied linguistics written by native English speaking students from various universities in the UK, Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore. The results from Kwan (2006) that may relevant to this study are those related to Move 2—evaluating the state of the field—and is present in most of the thematic units. It is realized in six major types of evaluative elements that vary in their degree of negativity and affirmativity. These results may not be surprising as students at the PhD level are expected to position themselves with a critical stance.

The study

Our interest in the LR of undergraduate students from the BA program in English at a Mexican state university emerged from two main sources. One was related to the difficulties that both teachers and students refer to in relation to writing research projects, including theses. The second was based on our general impression—also shared by other colleagues from the mentioned BA program—of the nature of the LRs that students produce, which tend to be more a summary of sources, and little or no evaluation of previous work takes place.

The question posed for the study is,

- Does evaluation take place in undergraduate students' literature review chapters? If so, how?

The participants

The participants for this study are two undergraduate students who completed their studies in a BA in an English Language Teaching ELT program from a Mexican University and chose to write a thesis as the modality for obtaining their diploma. Both NNS, these students have not lived or studied in English speaking countries. As part of their BA studies, both Nancy and Sergio registered for the Research Seminars (distributed in three terms), which consist of three-term courses that have as their main purpose to guide students in the process of conducting and writing a research project. In Research Seminar I (a 64-hour course), the students become familiar with the different paradigms involved in doing research related to language learning as well as the process for choosing a topic, writing a research proposal, and constructing their theoretical framework. As a product of this class, students are expected to write the first draft of the LR for their research project.

Nancy's and Sergio's theses

In relation to the actual writing of their theses, the process was somewhat different for Nancy and Sergio. In the first case, Nancy pursued a scholarship to write her thesis as a visitor student in a different program at another university in central Mexico. Having finished her research project there, she returned to finish her work in the BA in ELT program where she concluded her studies. Because of this, she had two different supervisors in the process of finishing her thesis. Sergio, on the other hand, pursued the initial project he concluded after studying the three terms for the Research Seminar and continued to work on this same project. He had only one supervisor.

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As for Nancy's and Sergio's motivation for writing a thesis, this seems to follow their interests both as learners and teachers. In the case of Nancy, her drive to write seems to follow her desire to further develop as a professional,

> Because I consider that theses have the purpose… of investigate and also to give an alternative in this case in, in teaching aspects, and in order to improve the teaching… process of, in this case well the… in a second language acquisition…

For Sergio, his interest to write seems to emerge from his desire to challenge his writing skills and in doing so, improving his writing,

> I wanted to improve my writing, my writing due to that is not so good, so I wanted to look for strategies and I think, well I believe that writing a thesis is one possibility to improve my skills, my writing skills.

Regarding their choice of topics, this appears to be very closely related with the participants' motivation to write a thesis in the first place. Nancy emphasizes the importance of helping learners become strategic readers; her thesis focuses on this topic.

> I consider that reading is sometimes avoided or like, being apart from the majority of the teachers because they consider that it is not important in the process of learning… they focus their attention in grammar or vocabulary, and they just, eh…like jump this… reading. So for me, was very important to make a deep study in the importance of reading and also in the strategies that, eh…we as English teachers can use in order to… to, to use this technique in order to support the learning process of the students.

For Sergio, it is writing, and more specifically how teachers assess their students writing, what is found to be at the center of his study.

> I want to write a thesis and is going to be a topic in my greatest lack, in my greatness weakness so is be going to be writing, so I can know more about the processes, I can know more about the theoretical framework, what implies to write and then it would be easier for me and maybe I can learn also to know formats, to know more about writing.

Methodology

A mixed-model approach was adopted with the intention of not only looking at the presence or absence of evaluation in the participants' literature review chapter, but also learning about the reasons behind their choices. We drew data from the participants' experience on writing their theses, and more specifically their LR through a semi-structured interview. Regarding the LR, a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the literature chapters was done in order to describe the extent to which the participants evaluated (E) their sources. In the case of the quantitative analysis, evidences of evaluation taking place Hyland's model for identifying *evidentiality*, *affect* and *presence* was used (Hyland, 2005); more specifically, his model of interaction in academic discourse (see Figure 1).
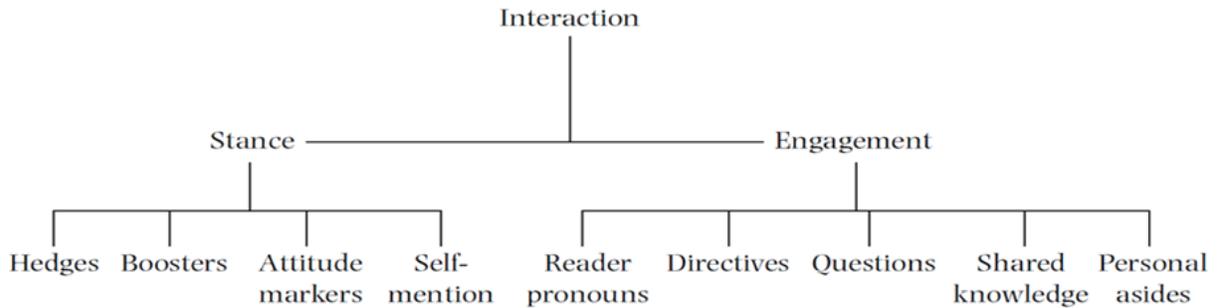
Figure. 1 Key resources of academic interaction (Hyland, 2005, p. 177).

In his original study, Hyland (2005) looks at the stance and engagement in a large corpus of academic papers (published research articles) from different disciplines through the analysis of the interaction the writers establish with their audience. For this, Hyland proposes a model that includes the two main aspects—stance and engagement. The elements in this model serve to identify the level of commitment writers depict in their texts when it comes to the possible credibility of a given statement or the attitude writers choose to give to their propositions. This model also allows the identification of the resources that writers make use of to engage their audience and in doing so establish their voice and authorial identity.

The findings

This part of the paper reports on the findings from the analysis of the LR's and the interview and is divided into four sections. The first reports on the difficulties faced by both participants. The second section presents an overview of the quantitative analysis of the LR's (for stance and engagement). The third and fourth sections illustrate the evidences of stance and engagement as found in the LR's. The analysis and extracts from the LR's and the interviews is then interwoven in order to explain the findings in the LRs.

Nancy's and Sergio's Perceived Challenges

Both participants find writing their LR a challenging experience. Their difficulties range from the time required to collect sufficient information as well as for the amount of work that selecting and organizing it in the writing of their LR implies. The specificities of the LR structure is also a difficult task,

> …how to organize my ideas…but I think also time. Time is consuming… I had to read a lot in order to be able to write something…maybe the structure how to do it, it's difficult…(Sergio)

This issue of organizing information is also present in Nancy's comments, but in her case is not the specific to the LR but to her thesis as a whole:

> OK in literature review I want to write about this, this and this…I want to investigate, well, this, this, this…And then, what was the, the principal… OK, number one, number

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two, number three…it helped me a lot in order to… like to prioritize all the, all the ideas for me , in all the document, not just the literature review. (Nancy)

That said, the difficulties as perceived by the participants seem to be more related with achieving logical progression.

...my writing organization, cohesion, coherence all the issues that involves, implies writing, all that are the things that have been difficult for me (Sergio)

A first look at Nancy's and Sergio's LRs

An initial comparison suggests that the use of linguistic resources for stance and engagement as evident in Nancy and Sergio's LR's is proportionally the same, with the exception of Reader Pronouns (see Fig. 2). Overall, both participants have a tendency for using attitude markers over hedging, and self-mention is practically absent. The same can be said of directives and appeals to shared knowledge, where both participants use these with relative frequency. An interesting difference though, is that Sergio's LR includes a much more frequent use of reader pronouns.

Examples of how Nancy and Sergio use stance and engagement follow in Figure 2.

Nancy

Stance				Total	Engagement					Total
Hedges	Boosters	Attitude markers	Self-mentions		Reader Pronouns	Directives	Questions	Appeal to shared knowledge	Personal asides	
6	0	22	0	28	2	20	0	14	1	37

Sergio

Stance				Total	Engagement					Total
Hedges	Boosters	Attitude markers	Self-mentions		Reader Pronouns	Directives	Questions	Appeale to shared knowledge	Personal asides	
15	0	39	1	55	15	14	0	22	0	51

Figure 2. Nancy's and Sergio's stance and engagement

Nancy and Sergio's stances

Stance is an "attitudinal dimension [that] includes features [that refer] to the way writers present themselves and convey their judgments, opinions and commitments [in order to] stamp their personal authority [or] step back to disguise their involvement" (Hyland, 2005, p. 176). In other words, stance refers to the linguistic choices of writers which in turn make them present to their audience hence projecting their "textual voice" (idem). Writers imprint authority or play it safe through mainly four aspects (in Hyland's model), which are hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions. The following sections illustrate the use of these aspects by Nancy and Sergio.

Hedging

According to Lakoff (Lakoff 1972 in Nivales, 2011), *hedges* make the degree of certainty in a statement more or less "fuzzy." Words such as possibly, may, seems, appear, etc. serve the purpose of indicating the extent to which a writer commits or detaches from a given proposition (Hyland, 2005). In other words, there is this element of "playing it safe."

Both Nancy and Sergio use hedging in similar proportion when they refer to research instruments, definitions, concepts, and/or approaches in their LRs. In the case of Nancy, her choice of using "may" and 'can' is as follows:

…the questionnaire may be used to find out one's own learning style…
…a leaning style may be defined as…
…it may be concluded that…
…it can be said that giving learners the chance to…

Sergio's hedging is similar in his choice of words:

…this model may be useful for teachers…
…Assessment can be defined as…

It cannot be said at this point, however, that this use of hedges always necessarily indicates away of avoiding full commitment to that which is stated. It may in fact indicate more a positive aspect of the information being conveyed. This can be said more specifically of those instances in which the purpose of the statement is that of positively assessing a technique or approach (…this model may be useful for teachers…) as is found in one of Sergio's section of his LR.

Boosters and certainty

The degree of certainty as expressed by writers, and also their resource for marking their involvement in a topic (Hyland, 2005) can be identified by words such as clearly, certainly, undoubtedly, recognized, etc. This "boosting" as exercised by writers, imprints their authority as they assert their knowledge over a given topic (Nivales, 2011).

From the analysis of the LRs, it would seem that Nancy or Sergio do not make use of this resource. This apparent absence of boosters could be due to their linguistic choices though, when at times it seems they are in fact declaring their expertise as we can see below:

…these terms are very popular and sometimes they can be misunderstood

Attitude markers

Attitude in academic texts more often concerns writers' judgments of epistemic probability and estimations of value (Hyland, 2005); that is, it depicts how the writer feels about the specific information they have chosen to share with their audience.

In the case of Nancy, she assesses the resources chosen to be included in terms of their usefulness or scope, and uses adjectives to do this:

> …in order to help learners to…X…provides a useful list of resources to know learners' own style.
> For this study, the use…based on…were very useful to support the investigation…
> …the definition provided by…is the broadest one…

Sergio, on the other hand, expresses his judgments in terms of the advantages of a given model or theory, but still uses adjectives to achieve this,

> One model…to give a fair assessment is…
> A number of theories emerged… helpful to understand…

A combination of hedging and attitude is found in Sergio's writing when he states

> One of the possible and best ways to…

Interestingly, Nancy or Sergio do not use adjectives with negative connotations in their LRs. This aspect of their stance is discussed later in this paper.

Self-mentions

Writers use pronouns (first person, both singular and plural) as well as possessive adjectives with the purpose of presenting interpersonal information that is also propositional and affective (Hyland, 2005). In the case of both participants, self-mention is practically absent as is evident in their LRs (one self-mention for Sergio and none for Nancy). Sergio allows himself in the text when he writes,

> Now I turn to discuss the last term

Other words may serve the purpose of self-mention. These include phrases such as the researcher, the writer (Nivales, 2011), but none of these was found in the LRs of the participants.

This finding seems to echo the rhetoric features of academic writing where first person is often demonized but more importantly, it may or not signal the absence of the development of an authorial identity although this—said of authorial identity—does not necessarily derive from the use of "I" and "We" (Roux Rodriguez et al., 2011). The following excerpt, however, indicates that both participants do perceive this prescription—the demonization of "I" as a key element for becoming authors and not being themselves (italics by the authors):

> I have to, to write, like in a formal, very formal way, not in the first person, not like I, I, I, I; I have to use certain language in order to be, to be very, very… like kind of polite, I don't know… formal? (Nancy)

> … well, I remember that teacher R told me that, it was not, correct. Because… in this part, of the document, you, you aren't, not you… you are playing the, the role of a researcher (Nancy)

> …well according to teachers also my seminar teacher says if you write I because you're like taking a big role, so maybe you cannot…maybe if… so if you do that, it can't be too personal… (Sergio)

The participants interpret this use in a different way. While Nancy does not feel constrained by the format

> No, no, no…I feel very comfortable with the way, because I, I was familiar with the… the style…

Sergio feels diminished:

> Do you have the degree to be too personal? Do you have the career to do it?" [Sergio talking about his instructor's comments on using "I"] So I think is not my level because they are masters, they are PhDs, so I say well I feel so (…) they are like big.

This aspect of Sergio's perceived level of authority is further discussed later in this paper.

Engaging their audience

Writers engage their readers by addressing them directly (reader pronouns and personal asides) and/or guiding those to particular interpretations (questions, directives, shared knowledge (Hyland, 2005). Nancy's and Sergio's choices for doing this establish the first significant difference between the two writers: while Sergio is more inclined to use reader pronouns to addressing his audience and Nancy uses directives to guide her audience. The following section illustrates this.

Reader Pronouns

Reader pronouns serve the purpose of establishing a dialogue with the audience (Hyland, idem) as this is addressed directly by the reader (you, your); they also allow the writer to share their agency with the audience (we, us, our).

Sergio's use of reader pronouns surpasses that of Nancy's (7 to 1). As for the choice of pronouns, Sergio's tendency, as was found in his LR, is to share his agency with the audience as he uses we (seven times) and our (three times) and us (one time) over you and your (one and three times respectively).

> …that is why we may determine that assessment
> …assessing our teaching…
> …it is important to clarify your goal [writing about the goals teachers establish when assessing their students' writing]

In the case of Nancy, her use of reader pronouns is found on two occasions only. She too shares her agency with the audience as can be seen below.

> …we all exhibit inherently ways of learning
> We must assume then...

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Directives

Directives instruct the reader to do something or to see things in a particular way determined by the writer (Hyland, 2005: 184). The signals that indicate their presence may be imperatives (consider, note, imagine); modals of obligation; or predicative adjectives expressing judgment (it is important to understand). The writer may want the reader to do a textual act (see table X; see X and X); or physical acts (as when directing the reader to follow instructions); and cognitive acts, where the intention is to have the reader follow a line of reasoning (Hyland, 2002).

Both Nancy and Sergio use this resource with Nancy the one who relies on it more. Regarding their linguistic choices, Both Nancy and Sergio tend to use predicative adjectives significantly more than modals of obligation. As for the type of acts intended for the participants' audience to perform, the predominant case is that of cognitive acts.

> …it is important to consider Lenz' point of view… (Nancy)
> …it is relevant to provide students the opportunity… (Sergio)

Directives have been seen as somewhat problematic when abused in academic writing as they may affect the writer-reader relationship (affecting harmony between them) and more importantly, pose a threat to face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). However, it may be the case that writers may not intentionally mean to impose on their readers but actually do so with a specific purpose hence their rhetorical choices (Hyland, 2002). In the case of Nancy, she is categorical in her intent to convince her audience of the importance of the topic in question,

> … I consider that reading is sometimes avoided or like, being apart from the majority of the teachers because they consider that it is not important in the process of learning; they focus, well the majority of my, could be my co…eh… my partners, my teacher partners, eh… feel like reading is not important, they focus their attention in grammar or vocabulary, and they just, eh…like jump this…this reading…was very important to make a deep study in the importance of reading and also in the strategies that, eh…we as English teachers can use in order to… to, to use this technique in order to support the learning process of the students

Nancy is adamant about her beliefs as she writes sections of her LR

> …it is important to consider that they should be given an opportunity to do global comprehension activities…

Questions

Similar to reader pronouns, questions help the writer to dialogue with their audience, but they are, in Hyland's words "the dialogic strategy par excellence" (Hyland, 2005, p. 185). The questions may be posed directly (What are the implications for this?) or indirectly (The question is then why learners engage in these activities the way they do). Neither Nancy nor Sergio make use of this engagement technique in their LR.

Appeals to Shared Knowledge

Appeals to shared knowledge position readers "within apparently naturalized boundaries of disciplinary understanding…where readers are asked to recognize something as familiar or accepted "(Hyland, 2005, p. 185).

Both Nancy and Sergio use appeals to shared knowledge in similar proportions.

> Regardless of these stages, the role of writing instruction can never be based just on training for expliciteness… (Sergio)

> Sometimes the little comments second language teachers make here and there have the effect of subtly urging students to take charge of their own destiny by understanding their own styles of learning and capitalizing on their abilities. (Nancy)

Personal Asides

Personal asides enable writers to address their readers directly as they briefly interrupt the flow of their writing to "respond to their audience" (Hyland, 2005:183). These conversation with the audience often appears within dashes or parenthesis. This resource is found only in Nancy's LR. Nancy uses personal asides on one occasion only,

> In this study, the definition provided by… – was taken as a basis for the fact that this research project has to do with the learning process applying certain techniques –reading strategies- according to personal preferences –learning styles- to improve reading comprehension.

Nancy's purpose as is evident in the text suggests that she breaks the flow to make sure that her audience is following the information as she presents it. This is a feature that Nancy herself identifies in her style as an individual when she says

> I don't know how to… involve… paragraph, and I tried to, to go step by step by step by step…like follow me… in all the document… well, that the reader… doesn't feel… like lost, in the middle of the document…

From the analysis of the LRs in this study, the findings point to a predominance of attitudinal evaluation, and the sources included in both LR's seem more like a listing of authors rather than a critical discussion of the information therein.

Nancy's and Sergio's Stance: "Who do you think you are?"

Up to this point, the findings suggest a predominance of affective evaluation, and the sources included in both LR's seem more a summary rather than a critical discussion of the information therein. These findings are similar to those of Akindele (2008), where an absence of critical analysis of authors was not a frequent element in the LR of graduate students. This predominance of an affective over an epistemic position towards the sources used in the construction of Nancy's and Sergio's LRs are illustrated in their linguistic choices through which they tend to positively assess their sources more specifically in terms of the usefulness and/or their appealingness at a more personal level,

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> . . .you don't have to, to choose just one author, you have to look for other that support the ideas of the previous author …the information that that, that was useful for me in order to support this… this part… this information was, more interesting for me, more help, well, helpful, helpful for me in order to support my… my thesis…(Nancy)

In making judgments about their sources – predominantly affective – Sergio's stance seems to follow his perception of the similarities between theories visited while constructing the framework for his thesis,

> I can't, I wasn't able to say something like I don't agree with him because according to my topic when I started the reading, looking for this information to gathering my information I found that all these authors complement themselves, it doesn't matter in which way, but they complement, even with a key concept... (Sergio)

Unlike Sergio, Nancy did find authors she considered insufficient for the purposes of her LR,

> …some authors were… like, I don't know, like OK say, like a lot of paper but not clean… I don't, I don't know how to, to express like… don't… say…the… the important aspects that I want to express. (Nancy)

Nancy's choice not to mention these authors in her LR as is evident in the analysis of her chapter may be more a lack of knowledge of the subgenre—where she is expected to critically discuss the literature surrounding the topic chosen. It may also be a result of the assumed expected learning that is often part of instruction in academic writing (Swales & Lindemann, 2002), but most importantly, it may constitute the evidence of culturally bound restrictions when interacting with an audience as was found by Akindele (2008). The rhetorical features of Mexican Spanish may also help in explaining the relative abundance of adjectives and the tendency to praise. On this, Abbot refers to the nature of "Mexican oratory [as being] structurally additive rather than subordinative, stylistically copious and redundant and thematically conservative" (Abbot, 1996, p. 35).

Another underlying reason for a predominance of a non-epistemic evaluation may be that of the lack of authoritativeness- perceived by one of the participants- and which can derive from the instruction learners receive.

> "Do you have the degree to be too personal? Do you have the career to do it?" [Sergio talking about his instructor's comments on using "I"] So I think is not my level because they are masters, they are PhDs, so I say well I feel so (…) they are like big. (Sergio).

This lack of evaluation in LR's was been found in other studies (Akindele, 2008), where restrictions to incur in the critical appreciation of others' work—especially said of figures of authority—seems to be culturally inherent. The words "masters" (as uttered by Sergio) indicate the power distance between him and his sources, thus leading Sergio to feel insufficiently qualified to critically evaluate others' work.

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This may be linked to this student previous schooling experiences. Montoya also attributes part of the problem to primary and secondary schooling, and it is worth briefly reviewing some of this relevant research here. Montoya (2001) believes that "primary and secondary schools have not found the equilibrium between what they are expected to do in terms of reading and writing and the different needs they face to meet this demand" (p.9). As a consequence, the focus of the school system is mainly on spelling and correct form of words and on the written product rather than on the process students follow when writing. Jimenez et al. (2003), for example, analyzed the language and literacy practices of two Mexican schools and report that great importance is given to appearance and form of written work as well as to correct spelling and punctuation.

Novice writers: Implications for writing instruction and future research

Non-native novice writers face two main challenges: writing papers in the line of the discourse community (with all the nuances this implies) and that of performing this task in a language different from their own. Their chances of succeeding as writers in the first case is closely related with not only the instruction they receive, both time and content-wise, but with the assumptions made on both sides –student and instructor—since

> An increase in awareness does not necessarily translate into an improvement in classroom results, nor does it imply a distinct approach for the teaching of writing. It is more about the creation of a more knowable environment for the second language writers to develop their skills (Crawford et al., 2013).

Previous experiences in writing the subgenre are also of significant importance. In the cases of Nancy and Sergio, the number of instruction hours received in order to write the first draft of their LR was approximately 20-24 hours (the last part of their Research Seminar I). This time included both the exposure to the subgenre, its analysis, and the outlining and first drafting of a literature review chapter. As for their second attempt (the actual writing of their thesis), no data was collected regarding the approximate time spent with their supervisors for the writing of their LR, neither for the nature of the supervision.

The study does not look at what other projects of similar nature may have fed Nancy's and Sergio's approaches for writing their LR. Further research involving a contrastive rhetoric approach of the projects and papers students write at this BA in ELT program—both in English and Spanish—could throw light on the process students go through and help evaluate the pertinence of instruction. The study also fails to include the views of instructors or the observation of instructing sessions, and assumptions cannot be made regarding the specific content and delivery during instructing sessions aside from what Nancy and Sergio express regarding the instruction they received.

Final considerations

Writing the LR poses a significant challenge for non-native speakers. This study has looked at the first attempts of two novice writers and the researchers hope it will contribute in shedding some light on the process students go through when writing their thesis and more specifically their LRs in a Mexican context. Of particular importance are the assumptions that we as instructors make about what students learn or should have learned as they are instructed on the

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structure and purpose of the LR. The paper invites us to revisit the complexities of learning to write and learning to write academic papers in a language that is not our own, but also to understand the type of support and explicit teaching of rhetorical differences between academic English and Spanish. On this, it is crucial that the specific circumstances of developing academic writing skills in an EFL context be taken into consideration.

With this in mind, effective academic writing instruction for non-native speakers becomes doubly challenging and requires that special attention be paid to both the specificities of the genre but also the leap that students must take when they face a different language and in doing so the need for becoming interculturally and rhetorically proficient. That said, the extent to which we provide novice writers with both the knowledge and skills to operate within the conventions of the discourse under discussion is crucial, but a task just as important or even more so is that of helping students to become aware of their own cultural boundaries towards authority and from there opening channels through which they will feel confident in allowing themselves not only to be critical but also to openly say so.

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