The lived experience of thesis writers in group writing conferences: The quest for "perfect" and "critical"

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

While group writing conferences have become a popular means of encouraging social interactions among doctoral students, little is known about how these group interactions influence a writer's learning of the thesis genre. Taking a genre as social practice perspective (Tardy, 2009), this study uses the analytical lens of *perezhivanie* (lived experience) (Vygotsky, 1994) to investigate how doctoral students perceive group writing conferences. Previous studies of thesis writers' experiences have suggested the interconnectedness of cognition, emotions, and the social contexts in their learning processes. The study focuses on the role that the oral interactions around the text play within doctoral students' social situations of learning thesis writing. The participants are two L2 doctoral students in group writing conferences run by the learning centre at an Australian university. Data were collected through observation and audio-recording of group discussions, interviews with students and facilitators, and students' writing drafts. The findings reveal the students' 'models' in their minds as drivers of their learning thesis writing. Underlying those perceived 'models' were some social and ideological forces related to 'native-speaker' English. The study illuminates the role of writing conferences in assisting students' co-constructing processes of the thesis genre in their social situations.

1. Introduction

Thesis writing is a social activity. Doctoral students need to gain a full understanding of this genre of writing as social practice, and be able to engage in and appropriate it for the achievement of their goals in their community. Genres, considered as social practice, reside not solely in textual patterns, but in the relationships between the purposes of the text, social contexts, and practices (Tardy, 2009). Social interactions with other people who write in the same genre serve as an opportunity to better understand these relationships.

In thesis writing, social interactions are increasingly being provided through writing support networks such as group writing conferences where writers share their writing and exchange feedback with others (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014). Writing conferences in general refer to writing consultations that take place between a student writer and a teacher, and group writing conferences refer to consultations taking place in a group of student writers with/without a teacher, typically over some weeks or months. While a number of studies have reported on the overall positive effects of such groups on thesis writing (e.g., Aitchison & Guerin, 2014), little is known about the specific ways in which writing conferences influence individual L2 speakers' thesis writing. This study draws on sociocultural perspectives, specifically Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky, 1994, 1998) and explores how the social interactions in the group activity support students' genre learning.

To date, studies have reported overall positive effects of writing conferences on thesis writing for both L1 and L2 students (e.g.,

Aitchison, 2009; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Rather than learning linguistic or textual patterns, the benefits of writing conferences which have been reported are concerned with learning social practices around text production (e.g., Ferguson, 2009; Parker, 2009) and understanding how these relate to thesis writing, for example, gaining confidence, becoming aware of the audience of the thesis, and developing a scholarly identity (e.g., Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Guerin et al., 2013; Larcombe, McCosker, & O'Loughlin, 2007; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011).

While these previous studies have suggested the interrelatedness of cognition, emotions, and the social contexts in doctoral students' genre learning processes, we lack an understanding of how the oral interactions around the texts under discussion in the group facilitate writing development. L2 writers' access to both academic research and peer culture in universities tends to be limited when compared to that of native-English-speaking students (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). In this situation, the supervisor-supervisee relationship is most likely to be the main or the only mediation for learning doctoral writing (Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, & Burgin, 2012). Cotterall (2011) found that international, non-native-English speaking PhD students' experiences of social and academic isolation as well as the quality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship were significant sources of their perceived difficulties with writing. Cotterall (2013) also found that the six international PhD students in her longitudinal study experienced both positive and negative emotions, such as feeling trust, confidence, confusion, stress, and anxiety, through their engagement in supervisor-supervisee relationships which affected their writing and other research activity. The study reported on here observed group writing conferences at an Australian university to explore the role that they play within doctoral students' social situations of learning thesis writing where their cognition and emotions interconnect with each other.

Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie*, often explained as 'lived experience', allows us to understand the relationships between how learners perceive their social situations and what they learn from them. My investigation of the lived experiences of L2 thesis writers in group writing conferences explores the 'predicaments' that each of the two students whose cases are discussed in this paper bring to their writing groups.

1.1. Sociocultural theory and perezhivanie

This section introduces the key concept of perezhivanie in sociocultural theory and how it is applied and investigated in this study. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 2012) is a set of ideas on the development of human mind. Central to sociocultural theory is Vygotsky's (1997) concept of mediated actions. Human minds develop through their interaction with the object of their interest in the environment by means of tools and cultural artefacts (e.g., language). Vygotsky (1994) used the concept of perezhivanie in order to understand the connection between children's mental development and the effects of the environment on their development. Perezhivanie is characterized as a unit of consciousness related to how a person experiences the effects of the environment he/she perceives, in other words, the understanding of his/her own experiences of certain situations that stimulate development.

This reflection of reality in one's inner mind, which leads to an individual's development, is referred to by Vygotsky's as the 'social situation of development' (1998). According to Blunden (2011), the social situation of development is a "predicament" that stimulates individual development activity because it constitutes "a kind of trap" (p. 464), which triggers learners' transformation of their views of the world and thinking. I use the term "predicament" for the analysis of specific conflicts that L2 thesis writers experience in their social situations of thesis writing; these conflicts can be seen as drivers for the individual activity necessary to write a thesis. Predicaments arise in one's perceptions, and are experienced in the reflection of reality in an individual's mind (Grimmett, 2014). Whether a situation is perceived as a predicament or how that predicament is perceived depends on how the situation is experienced by that person, that is, their perezhivanie. For example, students encounter a new demand when they start their PhD programs—mastering the thesis genre—and as they experience their social situations such as supervision, they perceive different aspects of thesis writing as their predicaments such as a lack of ability to write clear arguments as in Tardy's (2005) study.

How a person experiences a predicament involves generalization of experiences and feelings, apperception, awareness, interpretation and insight (Michell, 2016), and these sense-making processes of the predicament provoke new self-awareness and a reorganization of psychological functions to inform the individual's new ways of thinking and doing (Blunden, 2011). An individual's perezhivanie thus changes his/her view of the world and his/her perception of the effects of the environment, leading to development. For example, L2 thesis writers' insights into their predicaments shape their perehzhivanie, changing their views on their thesis writing. The change in their views of the world leads them to understand the advice given in the group writing conference in certain ways that could potentially lead to the resolution of their predicaments. Knowledge and experiences shape perezhivanie, so the concept of perezhivanie involves the connection of learners' experiences with both past and ongoing development (Mok, 2015). The investigation of L2 thesis writers' experiences and insights into their predicaments before attending the conferences can help us understand how they change their views of the world and learn from the advice offered by their peers and the facilitator in the group writing conference.

While the concept of perezhivanie is attracting growing interest in educational fields, there is ongoing discussion about how the concept should best be understood. Perezhivanie is sometimes translated as emotional experience or lived experience through emotions, and the concept is often referred to in relation to the investigation of emotional dimensions in language learning (e.g., Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2015). However, Vygotsky's emphasis is on the unity, the wholeness, of experiences of one's cognition, emotions, and social contexts. Mok (2015) claims that translating perezhivanie as "emotional experience" is misleading, giving the impression that perezhivanie only covers the affective aspects of experience rather than experience more holistically, as understood by Vygotsky. Mok (2015) argues for the potential of perezhivanie as an approach to reconceptualise fundamental SLA concepts, such as 'memory', from an emic perspective. Mok (2015) discusses his analysis of the perezhivnaie of his learning Mandarin as an L2 and suggests that "the experience of recall is an emic conceptualization of memory as an active mediating tool in the learning process" (p.