Academic writing

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My collected blogs on academic writing https://adrianholliday.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/academic-writing-76.pdf

The basis of academic communication

Writing and talking

- Precise, **evidence-based** communication
- In preparation for **peer-review**
- Evaluative audience
- Membership of a **disciplinary community**
- Exemplified in how academics **write, speak and arrange material** in a variety of seminars
- What I began to learn from attending research seminars even when I didn't understand the topic

Very particular genre

- Cautious, self-aware, carefully **crafted**
- Highly creative once **conventions** have been mastered
- Innovation from the inside, pushing the boundaries
- **Not** inviting multiple interpretations

The question of how **verisimilitude** is achieved in a particular community, given **unavoidable subjectivity**

Written and oral exam for a research degree

Another form of peer review

The written document is the main evidence that your examiner receives before meeting or knowing anything about you

The viva is then to see if you also **speak the discourse**

The quality of your speaking can save an imperfect thesis

Standing up behind every sentence you have written

Reference always to evidence

The difference between **anecdote**, **empty reference** and **authorial statements** based on evidence

> Egyptian women find it difficult to go to restaurants by themselves
>
> Egyptian women find it difficult to go to restaurants by themselves (Ramzi 2018)
>
> A number of researchers argue that Egyptian women find it difficult to go to restaurants by themselves (e.g. Ramzi 2018, Masri 2016, Motahedian 2021)

> I wish to argue that the researchers who claim that Egyptian women find it difficult to go to restaurants by themselves are following a particular research paradigm. An example of this is Ramzi (2018), who bases her, in my view, false claims on …
>
> It is important to note that the common view that …; as argued by (…), is … because …
>
> A number of researchers claim that … (…). However, interviews with … indicate that … Therefore, I wish to argue that … on the basis of …

Authorial voice

The evidence means **nothing without authorial voice** - evaluating, critiquing, p**ositioning**

What makes statements valid?

They are **precise** about how they can say what they say

They are cautious about **claims** and evidence

Mediates between pieces of evidence (literature and data) and the audience (readers, peers, **opponents**, examiners) to **make points**

Does not have to be in the first person

I wish to note that …

It is important to note that …

Here it is argued that …

More on this topic, from a range of disciplines, can be found in Holliday (2016)

Extracts

Following are extracts from successful doctoral theses.

Though varying in audience and size, similar principles apply to all research writing regardless of audience and size

Taken from students I have either supervised or examined; but the principles apply across disciplines

None however perfect

Our task is to see how the researchers employ voice

As we look at the extracts, we can therefore ask:

What are they doing that will **convince** the reader?

What do they tell us about the **positionality** of the writer?

What **devices** are being used (e.g. linking phrases, references back and forward, hedging)?

How are the authors **imposing their own views safely**?

What further information does the reader need?

What will need to have been done in preceding and following sections and chapters to **sync** with what is being said?

Setting the scene of the chapter

I begin my discussion and review of second language teacher education - L2 TEd - with a quote from Goodson and Hargreaves that suggests a relationship between human knowledge and identity. Curiously enough, the words ‘perceptions’ and ‘projections’ carry a mirror-like reflecting quality. The contrasting words also lend a reflexive quality to identity.

In the sections that follow, I will analyze scholarly passages such as this, in order to lay out the background and interpretation for the investigation that follows. My intentions in Chapter 2 are to look broadly at the complexities of L2 teacher education in order to shed light on the lives of classroom teachers and how they develop as teachers.

(Lengeling 2006: 29)

- Convincing?
- Positionality?
- Devices?
- Imposing views safely?
- Further information needed
- Preceding and following sync?

Commenting on phases and functions

Beginning in the mid 1980s, a change in the formal literature regarding second language teacher education became evident. Prior to this point, attention was focused on the methodology of ELT teaching. Books in print included: Celce-Murcia and McIntosh (1979), Harmer (1991), and Lewis and Hill (1993). All these materials came out with the word 'teaching' in their titles. They were filled with advice on how to handle the four skills, lesson planning, textbook selection, error correction, class management, etc. They represent the 'skills and techniques' or 'how to' books.

At about this same time, a new focus on teacher education entered the formal literature. Articles began to …

(Lengeling 2006: 40)

- Convincing?
- Positionality?
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Establishing key concepts

Based on this short discussion the principles of structuralism can be summarised as: phenomena, for instance language or culture, are systems with a particular structure; individuals living in and using these systems learn these structures and know what is expected of them in various situations; therefore, it can be assumed that individuals *choose* what to say and how to say it. Thus, structuralism looks for "*normative* consensus views of society" (*my emphasis*), where individuals are "free" and "rational" and "capable of employing language not only to express meaning, but to convey a social identity" (Williams & Fishman, 1992, p. 232).

(Yamchi 2015: 22)

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Establishing background

Globalisation is tightly woven into twenty-first century pictures of the world and therefore its particular place in my research needs to be justified. Its influence was mentioned by my participants, as a given, rather than as a new and exciting concept and it is not a strong focus of discussion, which, in line with the research questions, concentrated on the local and the individual. Yet, even if Globalisation is outside the core investigation of this thesis it has had an undisputed impact on the English teaching profession and must therefore constitute an important segment of the background to the study. The range of discussion is indicated by three immediately relevant titles: Fairclough's *Language and Globalization* (2006), Kumaravadivelu's *Cultural Globalization and Language Education* (2007) and the collection edited by Block and Cameron: *Globalization and Language Teaching* (2002). All three have something to say about the relationship of language and Globalisation, but from very varied standpoints. Fairclough's book, in keeping with his reputation, takes …

(Swan 2012: 20)

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Connecting data with theory

> ... The programme given by my creator has turned out to be a virus, which has spread to every screw in my body. Maybe, when all the electricity is used up, I still won't get freedom. Because I am a controlled robot forever. (Yin's diary, 28/11/05)

Yin describes herself as a 'no idea, no spirit, no freedom' study robot, who has to execute 'a lot of programmes edited by human beings', and 'can't be released' even in 'a programme maintenance shop in Britain'. It appears that Yin perceives herself as a mechanical learning product and her English learning experience in Britain as part of a continuous mechanical process. This has drawn my attention to question the nature of the learner and the nature of the learning and teaching process. As Firth and Wagner (1997) criticise, in the orthodox social psychological hegemony in second language learning (SLL), second language learners are treated as 'subjects' instead of complex and nuanced social beings ... This study follows a recent trend in the applied linguistics literature that views second language learners as 'the flesh-and-blood individuals who are doing the learning' (Kramsch, 2006, p. 98) and SLL as a fundamentally social, cultural and temporal activity (Norton, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; Miller, 2003; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). It attempts to relate social theory to SLL, to explore and understand the social nature of SLL.

(Gao 2008: 26-27)

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Establishing an important theme

One of the main themes that emerged from the data in this study is the impact of experiencing written literacy through rigid frameworks. Based on participants' narratives, it is clear that these novice writers have faced a strictly standardised system of academic writing in English. Accordingly, given the theme of the research in this chapter, I examine the issue of language standardisation in general, and the conventionalising of writing in particular. However, in view of the discussion in Section 1.3.4., I argue that standardised forms in ELT support neoliberal ideologies and political agendas, i.e. promoting monolingual orientations for creating "super-uniformity" (Holborow, 2012, p. 230). This uniformity is not achieved through direct force but rather through punitive measures. Based on the data, these ranged from concerns about failing a course to seeking recognition by using the 'acceptable' styles.

In order to examine the theoretical bases of these and other relevant issues, I have arranged this chapter as follows. First, I discuss … Following on from this, I then examine … These sections are also vital in laying the foundations for the debates on the construction of identity in Chapter 4. Furthermore, they provide a background for my approach to …

(Yamchi 2015: 19)

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Setting out a core idea

So, in this chapter, I will unravel what my research findings inform me about the nature of discourse, how they have therefore enabled me to contribute to the broad discussion of the nature of discourse in applied linguistics and other social theories in general. But my research findings are a product of discourse, a social practice which is socially, ideologically, culturally and historically constructed, which is influenced, explicitly or implicitly, by my theoretical and ideological stance. Therefore, on the way to narrating how I come to my current understanding of the nature of discourse, several theoretical discussions will be incorporated in the process of narration. These are the Concept of Yin-Yang (9.2), the Broad Discussion of the Nature of Discourse in Applied Linguistics (9.3.1), Chinese Marxism (9.3.2.1), Confucianism (9.3.2.2), and Social Constructionism (9.3.2.3). I will start with ...

(Duan 2007: 245)

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Making decisions about concepts

The terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' have been widely used in a variety of academic disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, literary and cultural studies, critical theory, social psychology, philosophy and many other fields. But the concept of 'discourse' is actually rather contentious and difficult to define - because there are so many conflicting and overlapping definitions, formulated from various theoretical traditions and disciplinary perspectives. Therefore, it cannot be pinned down to one meaning, since it has a complex history of its own (Mills, 1999: 6). Jaworski and Coupland (2006:1-2) list ten different definitions of discourse, from which it is found that, although each definition is markedly different from others in one way or another in terms of theoretical stance and research interests, a core set of concerns emerges as well. It seems that they all emphasise 'language in use'. ...

How can one present such a discussion, since the concept of discourse is so complicated, meaning such different things to different researchers or theorists in different disciplines? I have decided to adopt Mills's (1999) and Pennycook's (1994) approach.

(Duan 2007: 251)

- Convincing?
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Critiquing a position

In my view, Pennycook (1994b) is correct to emphasise the difference between 'mainstream' discourse analysis, which assumes language to be a transparent and neutral medium, and the other, more recent approaches, which take a critical stance towards the relationship between language and socio-political forces. As to the differences between the Fairclough/Kress version of CDA and the view of "discourse as power/knowledge", I agree that Pennycook (1994b) makes some important points regarding their respective conceptualisations of 'power' and 'ideology'. I shall discuss these differences in the next section.

However, the points raised by Pennycook (1994b) essentially derive from a different reading of the same source. It is important to note that both Fairclough and Kress cite Foucault as a key influence on their work (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1985; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Kress, 1985, p. 7). For the purposes of the present research I myself consider it unnecessary to draw strict distinctions between the different schools. The interpretation of 'discourse' which I follow in the present thesis is based on my own readings of Foucault (1972 and passim), while in my review of the literature I draw upon the work of various theorists who operate within the broad tradition of Foucaultian discourse theory.

(Grimshaw 2002: 17-18)

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Setting the scene in the introduction

These research questions prompted a cascade of further questions necessary to clarify current knowledge and illuminate the directions planned in this thesis such as asking what is already known about the topic: who are multilingual teachers, what do they do and why is it necessary to know? Searching for answers prompted more detailed study of major topics in the literature, such as the 'Centre/periphery' and 'native/non-native' distinctions, with further questions to be asked about their continuing relevance.

(Swan 2012: 9)

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Helping the reader to get the message

Every chapter, from the Introduction on, begins with a short paragraph set apart by a different font that constitutes a researcher narrative and meta-reflection on what is going on. I do this to help the reader imagine my city as a woman being analyzed, and to no small extent, to imagine myself as a "real" psychoanalyst working with an analysand, versus a researcher employing a psychoanalytic perspective. Again, my stance depends upon both theory and imagination. These beginning narratives hopefully lighten a densely packed thesis while also grounding it in the imaginative construction upon which it depends. A quick reading of these reflective narratives would give the reader a general impression of the larger story which unfolds in the thesis.

(Rodríguez 2009: 7)

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Establishing a key question

Literature about Mexico's (human) female side has tended to be damning. The most famous indictment of Mexican womanhood, although there are many, comes from Octavio Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude* published in 1950. He constructs women as sexually repressed, and characterizes them as suffering objects of violence and obsessed with motherhood to the extent that it impedes their full development as adults. Furthermore, he claims that national identity, represented by men, depends upon this dialectic to maintain its own subjectivity. The question that began to emerge as I immersed myself into Guanajuato's texts was the following: if *provincia* is constructed as female, can she speak? And if so, can she speak in ways that break away from and challenge these constructions? These are questions that have not been satisfactorily addressed within Mexican intellectual literature, and Chapter Two fleshes out this discussion.

(Rodríguez 2009: 17)

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Rationale for the structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is a result of a struggle to find a way to tell the reader my understanding and interpretation of the complexity of the phenomenon under study, in an established and accepted conventional thesis format. But at the same time, I do not want to lose the essence of the taste of my research's characteristics, such as the evolution, development, submission, emergence, especially, I want to give a sense of a representative of my understanding the complexity of the world or the phenomenon under study. This struggle is embedded on my philosophical understanding of the world. ...

As a result, the structure of this thesis is a combination of the conventional format - in the sense that it follows an established format: of introduction, data collection procedures, research methodology chapters and so forth; but it is a non- conventional format in the sense that, unlike most other PhD theses, there is no independent literature review chapter presented before the data discussion chapter. Instead, the different types of epistemology, which have influenced and shaped my thinking during the process of my research, will be incorporated into a retrospective chapter in Chapter 9.

(Duan 2007: 23)

- Convincing?
- Positionality?
- Devices?
- Imposing views safely?
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- Preceding and following sync?

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