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DISCOURSE COMPETENCE IN WRITTEN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract: This article presents a brief history of the concept of discourse competence as part of the communicative competence in a language, at the same time attempting to define it according to the available literature and highlight its relevance for present-day written academic discourse. The challenges encountered by non-native speakers of English who wish to publish research results in international journals will also be discussed in view of the current requirements of academic writing.

Keywords: discourse competence, communicative competence, academic writing, international publication, non-native speakers of English.

Besides innovative research results, the ability to publish findings in English-medium international journals represents the key to becoming a recognized, hence valuable academic writer, regardless of one's native or non-native speaker status. According to current publication trends, especially single and double-blind peer review processes, native and non-native scholars must meet the same criteria in order for their work to gain international recognition and prestige. Therefore, this paper focuses on the concept of discourse competence as part of the communicative competence in a language in order to identify the most relevant skills for successful international publication in today's highly competitive and diverse scientific environment, as well as the most frequent publication challenges encountered by non-native academics.

The term communicative competence was initially put forward by Hymes in 1972 in reaction to the distinction made by Noam Chomsky in 1965 between linguistic competence (knowledge of language structure) and linguistic performance (actual language use). Communicative competence can be divided into linguistic knowledge, i.e. "phonology and orthography, grammar, vocabulary and discourse" and pragmatic knowledge, i.e. "functions, variations, interactional skills and cultural frameworks" (Hymes, 1972: 2). In other words, language users must be able to use a language not only correctly but also appropriately. Therefore, when learning a language, children acquire "competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others. This competence, moreover, is integral with attitudes, values, and motivations concerning language, its features and uses, and integral with competence for, and attitudes toward, the interrelation of language with the other code of communicative conduct" (Hymes, 1972: 277-278). The idea that the social dimension plays an essential role in the concept of communicative competence is in accordance with the object of Pragmatics, which "studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society" (Mey, 1993: 6).

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Later, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed a theoretical framework for communicative competence that included grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competences. In their view, sociolinguistic competence consisted of sociocultural rules, which are required for the correct production and understanding of utterances within specific communicative events, and rules of discourse, which refer to the appropriate attitude and register or style that must accompany grammatical forms within various sociocultural contexts. At that point, they also cautiously labeled the rules of discourse "in terms of the cohesion (i.e. grammatical links) and coherence (i.e. appropriate combination of communicative functions) of groups of utterances" (Canale and Swain, 1980: 30).

The concept of discourse competence was also included in the guidelines currently used for the description and evaluation of linguistic performance. Thus, according to the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001), communicative language competence includes three components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. Linguistic competences represent knowledge of lexical, phonological and syntactic features, sociolinguistic competences are concerned with the sociocultural norms of language use while pragmatic competences refer to the functional use of linguistic resources. Pragmatic competence includes discourse competence (the ability to organize, structure and arrange messages), functional competence (the ability to perform communicative functions) and design competence (the ability to use interactional and transactional schemata for sequencing messages). In the same document, discourse competence is further defined as "the ability of a user/learner to arrange sentences in sequence so as to produce coherent stretches of language. It includes knowledge of and ability to control the ordering of sentences in terms of: topic/focus; given/new; 'natural' sequencing: e.g. temporal [...]; cause/effect (invertible) [...]; ability to structure and manage discourse in terms of: thematic organization; coherence and cohesion; logical ordering; style and register; rhetorical effectiveness; the 'co-operative principle' (Grice 1975)." (Council of Europe, 2001: 123)

Communicative and discourse competence do not solely refer to spoken language, but also to written language production. Just as in the case of spoken interaction, proficient language users must be able to arrange, organize and structure written sentences by using effective cohesive devices and discourse markers in an appropriate register and style with the help of suitable rhetorical devices for specific communicative purposes. The development of discourse competence is considered to be "a key element of an individual's overall communicative competence in a language", especially for language users who need to develop their academic writing skills (Bruce, 2008: 5).

Since "academic ability is frequently evaluated in terms of competence in a specialist written register" (Hyland, 2009a: 52), successful writers for specific purposes must be able to apply their knowledge of language rules in specific contexts in order to demonstrate their membership to a certain discourse community. By applying appropriate discourse competences for the production of texts such as research articles, which are approved and valued by their respective discourse community, scientists gain recognition, power and control in their field of activity.

Although discourse competence is generally acknowledged as part of the communicative competence in a language, Bhatia (2004) criticized the concept of communicative competence for being too general and unable to address the specificity of professional and institutional environments, and instead proposed that the concept of *discursive competence* be introduced in general socio-cultural and professional contexts. In his view, discursive competence includes textual, generic and social competence. Textual

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competence primarily focuses on text and language as it refers to the use of textual, contextual and pragmatic knowledge for the production of appropriate texts. Generic competence involves the ability to deal with various rhetorical situations by using the generic conventions of specific disciplinary cultures and practices while social competence enables language users to express their social identity by taking part in public and institutional events (Bhatia, 2004: 144-145). He further developed the idea of generic competence, which was also mentioned by Bruce (2009), and placed it in relation with that of professional expertise achieved through appropriate genre use. Thus, generic competence enables members of a certain professional community or "community of practice" (Wenger *et al*, 2002) to employ suitable genres for specific rhetorical purposes, to find the means for expressing private intentions and thus to achieve commonly set goals.

Bhatia's three-element equation for professional expertise includes the acquisition of discursive competence, disciplinary knowledge and professional practice (Bhatia, 2004: 146). These three elements could be characterized by an input-output (or receiver-sender) type of interconnection. In order to become an expert member of the medical discourse community for instance, one must first acquire knowledge of a discipline by attending medical schools and specialized training programs (input) before being allowed to demonstrate their skills by practicing medicine (output) and sharing their knowledge with the rest of the community via published research (output).

Even if communication is vital in all these three instances, the last one may prove to be the most challenging, especially when communication takes place in a language other than the writer's first language. In such situations, the acquisition and proper use of discourse or discursive competence could differentiate between expert and novice or less successful community members. The strong linguistic and textual knowledge of the expert members of specialized academic communities, their thorough familiarity with genre conventions and adequate use of rhetorical skills should facilitate the production and publication of valuable research contributions.

This paper will continue to operate with the concept of discourse (not discursive) competence given its widespread occurrence in international terminology. Therefore, the textual, generic and social competences characteristic of discursive competence will be regarded as similar to the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic components included in the general concept of discourse competence, as also acknowledged by the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) and consequently applied for language assessment purposes worldwide.

Despite the large number of research articles published by non-native speakers of English in international journals from various fields, which indicates that their access to scientific recognition and success is not restricted, several factors that may put a strain on this process were identified. The purpose of this section of the paper is not to make a plea for the possible inequalities between native and non-native speakers when it comes to international publication, but to summarize previously identified issues for a better understanding of what the writing and publication processes imply in the present academic environment, and what aspects non-native language users should take into consideration when preparing to submit manuscripts to international journals. The existence of recent studies focusing on the publication issues and difficulties experienced by non-native speakers of English (Salager-Meyer, 2008; Hyland, 2009b; Ferguson *et al*, 2011; Moreno *et al* 2012; Flowerdew, 2013; Mureșan and Perez-Llantada, 2014; Kuteeva and Mauranen, 2014), coupled with 'older'

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concerns (Gosden, 1992; Swales, 2004; Tardy, 2004) demonstrate that the issue is still of interest in the academic world.

Linguistic difficulty related to insufficient English language proficiency was often identified as a major source of disadvantage for non-native speakers, which may affect publication output and success rates. Conversely, Anglophone scholars were believed to benefit from a "free ride when it comes to writing for publication" given the reduced efforts and costs associated with this process, as well as the absence of the "emotional burden" of having one's work evaluated in a second language (Flowerdew, 2013: 303). Although these factors may not adversely affect the publication rates of non-native academics, the fact remains that extra resources are involved, if we were to think only of the costs involved in integrating ESP courses within undergraduate education programs in non-Anglophone countries like Romania. Studies acknowledging the need for extra resources in this field were carried out by Tardy (2004) and Hyland (2009b).

The existence of linguistic inequality between native and non-native speakers of English was also revealed by a survey of the perceived attitudes of Spanish academics from various disciplines, including Biological and Health Sciences, affiliated to the University of Zaragoza, which was carried out by Ferguson *et al* (2011). The results revealed, among other things, that 95% of the respondents agreed that the dominance of English represents an advantage for Anglophone academics, although this advantage was only regarded as unfair by approximately half of those included in the survey. These findings also correlated with the respondents' self-reported English-language proficiency in terms of reading, writing and speaking abilities. Thus, scholars who reported higher proficiency levels disagreed that the dominance of English offers an unfair advantage to native speakers, which suggests that the answers were influenced by the respondents' perceived level of language proficiency. Although the results obtained in one country cannot be extrapolated to all non-native speakers in general, they report the perception of academics who speak a Romance language and whose previous experience with learning and publishing in English could resemble that of Romanian academics.

However, the matter can also be viewed from a different, more encompassing perspective like the one provided by Salager-Meyer (2008), according to whom, besides the importance of linguistic skills, issues such as location (centre vs. periphery), level of expertise (junior vs. senior) and network access override the native – non-native distinction. The importance of the level of expertise was also highlighted by researchers such as Swales (2004) and Hyland (2007, 2012). The centre-periphery dichotomy discussed by Salager-Meyer (2008), i.e. the distinction between the industrialized and the developing world provides valuable insights into the economic and political factors behind the realities of the international scientific and academic environment. In this respect, a strong association was noticed between scientific research output and a country's national wealth, percentage of domestic gross product (DGP) allotted to scientific research, overall level of English proficiency and publication tradition, which is less strong in most developing countries except for India, China and Iran. Intellectual migration from developing to developed countries is another factor, which has also influenced Romania if we take into account the number of healthcare professionals who migrated to European and other foreign countries in recent years after having benefitted from state-funded medical education.

The centre-periphery model borrowed from political economy was also mentioned by Flowerdew (2013) in order to explain why publication is a problematic issue in periphery but not in centre countries due to difficulties such as inadequate access to the latest publications,

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research funding, research facilities and absence of publication prone educational systems. The term "off-network" with reference to academics from peripheral regions was also used by Swales (2004) and Flowerdew (2013).

Moreover, Salager-Meyer's (2008) observation that most research funding in developed countries is provided by the private sector (about 70%) while only 30% is ensured by the state, whereas in developing countries more than 75% constitutes public or university funding, should be particularly troubling for Romania. According to data provided by Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, Romania consistently allotted less than 0.50% of its domestic gross product to research during the 2002-2014 period, which placed it last in the European hierarchy. The year 2008 was the only exception to this trend, with 0.57% allotted in the year with probably the highest national economic growth before the ongoing crisis. The same source indicates that Romania was ranked last in 2014 with only 0.38% of its DGP, surpassed by countries such as Cyprus, Latvia, Croatia and Greece with also less than 1%, whereas more than 3% of the DGP of Finland, Sweden and Denmark were directed towards research and development activities (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tipsst10&plugin=1 Retrieved 8 September, 2016). These figures undoubtedly place Romania in the category of developing countries with a low interest toward research activities and a relatively recent international publication tradition that dates back to the beginning of the 1990s. On the other hand, these same statistics increase the value of scientific research articles published by non-native academics in high-ranking international journals.

Although not very recent, the survey on the language-related criteria most likely to influence the chances of non-native academics being published in international journals conducted by Gosden (1992) revealed interesting facts and opinions expressed by North American and British journal editors in the fields of Physics, Chemistry and Biology. The results of this questionnaire survey showed that out of the top ten language-related problems investigated, which covered sentence-level concerns (accuracy and lexis), discourse level issues (cohesion and coherence), style and register, the "ability to manipulate skillfully the language used in making this claim" and "appreciation of the level of claim that can justifiably be made for their research" were ranked by journal editors on the fourth and fifth place, respectively (Gosden, 1992: 126). These were preceded by the ability to link sentences in a logical and clear manner, develop the topic coherently and use correct grammar at sentence level, which are crucial elements for any correct piece of written discourse.

The high importance placed on the ability to produce relevant and viable knowledge claims demonstrates that the appropriate use of rhetorical strategies is crucial for the success of a scientific research article. The editors' answers to the much debated question of bias against manuscripts submitted by non-native speakers revealed that paper acceptance mainly depends on scientific merits since 65% of the respondents denied rejection based on linguistic grounds alone by stating that there are no specific screening guidelines for non-native speaker manuscripts. However, answers also pointed out that poor science combined with poor writing skills could easily lead to article rejection, also because "poor science indicates poor thinking and therefore poor expression and presentation" (Gosden, 1992: 133). A similar, more-recent investigation would be highly valuable in order to gain insight into the current views of native speaker editors of international journals and thus to confirm or deny these previous findings.

In conclusion, discourse competence in academic written discourse refers to the appropriate use of linguistic resources and rhetorical strategies that allow effective

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communication in specific contexts according to both the purpose of the text and the expectations of the target audience. In order to achieve this, both native and non-native writers must be aware of the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions of discourse competence in order to present research results successfully and thus gain or consolidate higher positions in the international academic environment. Besides a high level of professional expertise required for the production of well designed and carried out studies, non-native academics should possess an appropriate level of language proficiency and discourse competence in order to introduce new knowledge claims successfully regardless of a possibly less central position in the academic world.

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