




The Experience of Multilingual Doctoral Students Related to Academic Success: A Descriptive Qualitative Study

Deborah Lewis, PhD, RN, CNE

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6207-3235>

Amy Bakke, MA

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

Amber Cook, MM

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

Julie James, MSLIS

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

Carol Griffiths, MSN

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

Contact: deborah.lewis@mail.waldenu.edu

Abstract

When multilingual students face the challenge of writing a doctoral capstone or dissertation, delays in academic progress may occur. The aim of this study was to identify writing challenges multilingual doctoral students face and provide recommendations regarding learner-centered resources to support timely academic success, as literature regarding multilingual students and language diversity in the doctoral environment is limited. A qualitative descriptive design was used for this study, and six multilingual DNP and PhD alumni participated. Data were collected using semi-structured audio interviews and analyzed using iterative content analysis. The findings support the need for community and culture to support language identity and doctoral writing development. Findings also support that early diagnostics of writing issues and opportunities for editorial feedback help support multilingual doctoral students. Findings also suggest a need for faculty and academic team development regarding the impacts of language diversity and culture on academic writing. Ultimately the goal is to help all graduate students preserve and share their identity in their writing.

Keywords: *multilingual students, online doctoral students, academic support, language diversity*

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Introduction

Academic writing is demanding in an individual's first language; it is made even more difficult in a second language (Politzer-Ahles et al., 2016). Multilingual writing challenges are both scholastic and social in nature, and they can delay a student's degree progress and lead to frustration (Ravichandran et al., 2018). This article shares the academic writing experiences of six doctoral nursing and education alumni of an online university.

Literature Review

"Multilingual," as used in this study, refers to persons who use multiple languages (Valdés, 2022). In the U.S. academic context—and for the purpose of this study—multilingual students are those who have learned English alongside or after learning other languages. They may be international students or U.S. domestic resident students. Some multilingual students may regularly speak a language other than English at home or in the workplace while completing their academic work primarily in English. Although we know anecdotally that an individual's experience with language or language background can affect their success in academic writing—and their time to degree completion—it is unclear how many multilingual, online doctoral students have experienced learning challenges, as well as what those challenges are.

Academic Writing Difficulties

The academic writing difficulties described by multilingual graduate students in traditional universities include a lack of familiarity with the conventions of academic writing and a lack of awareness of the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of research writing (Gürel Cennetkuşu, 2017). When English is not the first language for students, it can present challenges for their adaptation to Standard Academic English (SAE; Thonus, 2014). The impact of a student's English language skills is exacerbated when writing expectations increase and is often observed when students move from structured class assignments to a more rigorous doctoral capstone project or dissertation (Ravichandran et al., 2018).

Sentences in many languages, including English, rely on syntactic structure to convey meaning, which dictates the way words are arranged, as well as the use of words to identify relationships or ideas. Written English is structured differently than other languages (Ravichandran et al., 2018). Language transfer may include unintentionally applying the syntactic structure from one language to another, impacting the clarity of communication in writing (James, 2018).

Writing in SAE—an even more formal writing style—conforms to a set of standards in presenting scholarship (Paul & McDonald, 2017). Multilingual graduate students express concerns with paper organization, choosing the correct word, and having limited vocabulary and expressions (Gürel Cennetkuşu, 2017). These students also describe significant challenges regarding writing semantics, presenting ideas logically, creating citations, critical thinking, and understanding plagiarism (Ravichandran et al., 2018).

Reading Comprehension and Research Skills

Academic writing isn't the only skill affected by language background; reading comprehension and research skills can also present a challenge (Singh, 2019). English is the language of many peer-reviewed publications, and multilingual students with lower reading comprehension and vocabulary in English are likely to experience more challenges and anxiety when identifying relevant literature (Sinnasamy & Karim, 2016). These challenges can compound multilingual students' ability and confidence to formulate effective library searches (Gürel Cennetkuşu, 2017; Sinnasamy & Karim, 2016).

For multilingual graduate students, reading comprehension and research skill challenges can lead them to undervalue their academic abilities (Ravichandran et al., 2018). Students who were previously confident in their English language skills are met with uncertainty when faced with doctoral-level academic challenges. As a result, students may have difficulty expressing ideas clearly and may feel anxious or frustrated when interacting with peers and faculty (Galmiche, 2018).

For many multilingual graduate students, receiving feedback or criticism of their work results in feelings of shame and may result in the discontinuation of their program (Galmiche, 2018). Other factors, including deficits in self-determination and self-efficacy, may also lead to failure to complete the academic program (Prince et al., 2018). For those who remain in academic programs, these feelings can be compounded when multilingual students utilize strategies that may have been part of their English language learning process, including copying blocks of text, and now find themselves accused of plagiarism (Conference on College Composition and Communication [CCCC], 2020).

Sociocultural Barriers to Language Learning

In addition to writing and research challenges, multilingual graduate students also face sociocultural barriers to language learning. Multilingual students often come from backgrounds where writing is shaped by linguistic and cultural features (CCCC, 2020). Language learning is socially fashioned through communication with others, including vocabulary, organization, flow of ideas, and translation based on cultural norms (Kato & Kumagai, 2020; Ravichandran et al., 2018; Singh & Jack, 2022; Vygotsky, 1978). The complexity of communication is demonstrated in the concept of language transfer, or code-switching, and is reflected in the learner's flexibility to switch between more than one language, or language identity, to express a concept (James, 2018; Paul & McDonald, 2017; Wei, 2018). Language transfer is often done for the comfort of the reader and for the purpose of respectably meeting the expectations of the dominant U.S.-based academic audience (Mangan, 2023).

In the sociocultural theory of education, Vygotsky (1978) described language as a highly personal and social process that flows mutually together much like a river and its tributaries. Social discourse is one of the important elements that support language skill development for multilingual students (Ravichandran et al., 2018).

In an asynchronous online learning environment, there may be limited opportunity to have supportive dialogue with other students (Prince et al., 2018; Ravichandran et al., 2018; Tavares, 2019). Faculty are often the primary individuals who online students communicate with, and these faculty-student relationships contribute to the learner's sense of community, which supports their academic success (Riedel, 2015). In U.S. universities, however, these faculty are often monolingual and may not be prepared to support the linguistic and cultural needs of multilingual students, including understanding the student's confidence in writing in SAE (CCCC, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

Nursing doctoral programs are offered in both online and traditional university settings, but research regarding support for multilingual graduate students has primarily focused on the traditional setting. This study sought to understand the multilingual doctoral students' experience related to academic writing. The results of this study will support educators and academic organizations in understanding the needs and challenges faced by multilingual doctoral students and will provide recommendations regarding learner-centered resources to support their timely academic success.

Methods

We used a descriptive qualitative approach in this study to understand the experience of multilingual doctoral students in relation to their academic success. This methodology allows the researchers to unlock the experiences of the participants regarding the phenomenon of interest: Multilingual doctoral students' experience related to academic writing. The use of semi-structured, open-ended questions encouraged respondents to share their experiences (Kim et al., 2017).

Purposeful sampling was used to obtain rich descriptions of the academic writing experiences of multilingual doctoral students (Kim et al., 2017). Doctoral faculty members sent recruitment flyers and study consent to recent graduates of nursing and education doctoral programs. The eligibility criteria included doctoral student alumni who self-identify as speaking at least two languages, including English, and who graduated within 1 year prior to the interviews. Interested participants returned an email to the principal investigator/interviewer and an interview was arranged using the Zoom Pro platform. Only the audio was recorded for the study.

Six participants met the criteria for the study. The sample size was small due to the nature of engagement with participants and the extent of analysis (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Participants were interviewed until the response content reached a level of redundancy and provided rich descriptions to illustrate the study phenomenon.

Once Institutional Review Board approval was received, participants were recruited. Eligible participants who completed the email-informed consent process were scheduled for an initial interview. Prior to beginning the interview, participants were asked to confirm their agreement to participate in the study and to be audio recorded. The interviews were conducted by the principal investigator with experience in qualitative research. The use of audio-only interviews helped support sensitivity to privacy. Once the interview was completed, the researcher thanked the participant and offered a \$20 gift card for their participation. The gift card was emailed to their provided email address.

Instruments

The data collection instrument for this study was semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. These questions were developed by the interprofessional team of doctoral faculty, academic librarian, graduate writing professionals, and the graduate student assistant. The questions were informed by the literature and were aligned with the problem identified and the research question. The semi-structured interview, as well as the demographic questions, are listed below.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

- Describe the writing expectations in your doctoral program.
- What was most helpful to you in supporting the development of your doctoral writing?
- What sources inside or outside your program helped the most?
- What formats of support do you find most helpful (e.g., videos, live online presentations, text-based materials, etc.)?
- What could be improved to support multilingual students in developing their doctoral dissertation or capstone project?

Demographic Questions

- Dissertation or capstone project?

- Time in program?
- Stage of completion?
- Language primarily used for writing prior to enrolling in the university?

Interview notes were taken during each interview. The Zoom Pro platform allowed for recording and creating a digital file of the audio interview. The interviews lasted 45–60 minutes. The website Rev.com was used to provide transcription of the audio recording.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were reread and verified by the principal investigator. Data was hand-coded, utilizing an iterative content analysis approach. The principal investigator organized the data and provided initial codes and categories. Members of the research team reviewed the initial coding and returned comments. The final code table (Table 2) reflects full agreement from all members of the research team. There were no discrepant cases identified as part of the study findings.

Transparency of data analysis was provided by sharing quoted segments of dialogue that corresponded to the identified themes. The use of more than one coder helped to ensure there was a level of control for researcher bias in the analysis. Since qualitative research usually assumes that the researcher will influence the study, reflexivity is an important part of the transparency of the study. A reflexive analysis was conducted, and interview notes were reviewed to identify biases. In each case, the interests of the researcher and participant did not demonstrate a conflict that would influence the researcher's interpretation of the data.

Results

All the participants could understand, speak, and read/write at least two languages, including English. Only two participants had the same first language background. The lowest number of languages spoken by any one participant was two, and the highest was four. A variety of languages were spoken, including Russian, Hebrew, Farsi, Creole, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Twi. On the question of the participant's years using English, the time ranged from 8 to 40 years. The participants spent 1.5 to 3 years completing the writing of their doctoral papers. Four participants received a nursing doctoral degree (2 DNP and 2 PhD), and two earned a PhD in Education. The PhD students wrote traditional 5-chapter dissertations while the DNP students developed a 5-section doctoral capstone project. Five participants were female, and one was male. The demographic data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics and Diversity of Languages*

ID	Degree	Program	Primary language writing	Primary language speaking	Years using SAE	Years to finish paper
P1	PhD	Nursing	English	Russian	8	1.5
P2	DNP	Nursing	English	English and Farsi	40	3
P3	PhD	Education	Creole	English	30	3
P4	PhD	Education	English and Spanish	English and Spanish	20	2
P5	PhD	Nursing	English	English and Spanish	30	2
P6	DNP	Nursing	English	English and Twi	20	1.5

SAE = Standard Academic English

Themes Identified

Four primary themes evolved from the data: Academic Writing Expectations; Being Multilingual and Writing Identity; Support Received for Writing Success; and Support Needed by Multilingual Students. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes, categories, and codes from the data. Each theme will be discussed, and representative participant data will be shared below.

Table 2. *Synthesis of the Themes, Categories, and Codes*

Themes	Categories	Codes
Academic Writing Expectations	Expectations for Writing	Structure of writing (paragraph format, argument development, paragraph integration, idea and flow development) Detail in writing (increased) SAE expectations
Being Multilingual and Writing Identity	Multilingual Language Use and Culture	More effort required of multilingual students Expression of ideas through writing reflects self Discourse between language translation and meaning present Connection of language use and culture (cultural meaning to phrases) Complexity of different languages Code-switching and language identity (part of communication of language)
Support Received for Writing Success	University Resources	Chair and Committee Member (feedback on content and writing) Library (librarian) Writing Center (provides edits and individualized writing support at the doctoral level) Webinars/Seminars Podcasts Classes Form and Style (final editorial review) Checklists
	External Academic Resources	Grammarly Faculty (YouTube videos) Google Translate Multilingual Outside Editor Social Media (Facebook for mentoring) Online (Google search/research/organizations)
	Personal Resources	Self Personal adaptability (being multilingual) Flexibility from previous writing experience (previous degrees) Others Family Peer support Social media (Facebook for peer and emotional support—to reduce isolation) Hearing and reading the words (helpful)

		Using Models for Language or Rhetoric	Comparing own writing to others' writing Reviewing writing examples (helpful) Reading student dissertations
Support Needed by Multilingual Students	Early and Individualized Academic Writing Support Multilingual Support	Clarifying writing expectations early Identifying problems early Individualized feedback Earlier opportunities for editorial feedback Academic team (preparation to support multilingual students) Multilingual mentors (importance of multilingual support) Feedback (can feel personal)	

Theme 1: Academic Writing Expectations

The participants were asked to describe their expectations for doctoral writing when they began the doctoral program. Most shared that they expected the detail required in their writing to increase and the structure of how writing would be different from their master's program. Representative participant expectations included the following responses:

"The writing had to be fluid with more detail." (P1)

"I had to pay attention to how they [faculty] were using words, and I had to relearn that." (P3)

"At the beginning it was a little difficult because I have some problem with some phrases." (P5)

Several participants noted that more effort was required of multilingual students as compared to native English speakers, including:

"I had to really make an effort and invest time into really changing it to the way that it should have been. I still had to reread everything." (P1)

"I actually rewrote the entire paper four times to create a very clean and brand-new presentation from the beginning to the middle to the end." (P2)

"I just had to write with the dictionary. ... I had to use a dictionary to grasp the meaning because even though you see a word it can mean something different in a different language." (P3)

Theme 2: Being Multilingual and Writing Identity

Theme 2 focused on the use of multiple languages and cultures and their impact on academic writing. Most participants spoke about how the expression of ideas is different in their first language, which made translation difficult. Some of their responses included:

"I was changing things, but I had to make sure it still has the same meaning. I had to make sure it doesn't change the content." (P1)

I had to speak my heart, [but with the changes] there was loss of meaning because it didn't mean the same. It was just two different ideas and it's like, yes, English is that difficult to learn." (P2)

"[W]hen you write in a native language, you can say everything you want to; but when you translate, you have to drop some of the words." (P3)

According to participants, language transfer or code-switching (one language in academic life and another in social/home life) makes writing difficult. “You know what you’re trying to say in your [own] language,” said participant P6, “but somehow you can’t translate it into English.” Participant P3 agreed and shared:

You still go back to your language of your youth, of what you grew up or heard your parents say. But when to write this thing [dissertation], it takes on a whole different story, I had to make English my first language, if I want to survive.

Focus is the key according to P4, who shared:

You really have to focus on your writing and the way that we write; there are a lot of things involved with the grammar that we need to pay attention to—at the same time—as our own passion about the subject. It becomes part, it’s part of you and who you are and your identity.

Participants talked about how the tension of language transfer (code-switching) impacted their writing, as well as how difficult it was to convey their thoughts in SAE; they had to rethink their writing to meet the requirements of SAE. According to participant P3:

Forcing you to, to make American language the dominant language, but when you go home and your friends and family, like, why are you speaking like that? But it sounds weird; when I go home, it sounds weird. ... And [my editor] said, the language is unique, and you can see the culture. But when you’re in Rome, you do like the Romans.

Participant P4 agreed, saying:

We are always code-switching in our minds. I’ve gotten better with my academic language. But there was always something I needed to think about twice when I was writing my dissertation. When we are passionate about something, our emotions are connected to our first language—and that’s Spanish for me. And so being able to transfer that and keep my cool and not, you know, get all over the place with my dissertation, it was a struggle.

Several participants stressed that phrases hold different cultural meanings. For example, feedback that is respectful in one context may not be in another. And feedback can feel personal. According to participant P2, there are “[s]o many angles that it actually touches you to the personal level.”

Participant P3 agreed, saying:

Cultures are unique. And when you ask others to write first, they’re going to write it in their native language. And you’re going to try to transform it into English, American English. It will not look the same. So, if as a professor, as American, keep it in the back of your mind that when you get international students, not everyone, but majority, they are going to struggle with the American English. Not that they cannot write, they just have a language barrier that is just different from the land that they’re in or their schooling.

Theme 3: Support Received for Writing Success

During the study, participants described the specific supports they received, which they felt contributed to their academic success. Three sub-themes of support surfaced for writing success, including university resources, external academic resources, and personal resources. Descriptions and examples of participant responses are discussed below.

University Resources

Each participant was interviewed about the support they received for their academic writing. The participants acknowledged using a variety of resources from the Academic Success/Writing Center at their university. These resources included individualized writing support; webinars/seminars; podcasts; doctoral writing classes; and a final editorial review. According to some of the participants:

“[At the] writing center, they were really helpful to review some sections and give me some points like this is how you write and that’s how, what you need to change.” (P1)

“The library was the ocean for me. I find so much more information that I can use, and it supports all of my ideas.” (P2)

“I used the university library, and I used the writing center, [and] they gave us writing seminars. I had to grasp plural, the verb tense, and I had to grasp those things because in Creole we write backwards.” (P3)

All of the participants acknowledged the support that their chairs and committee members provided them:

“Most feedback was from my coach, Chair.” (P5)

“I would say my chair really helped me.” (P6)

Participants also mentioned the value of checklists and templates, which provided detail regarding the doctoral writing expectations. Remarks included:

“Following the checklist and knowing what the expectations are—and sticking to those expectations—[and] following the rules.” (P1)

“I would say knowing the rules would help so much, because where was I with following the rule with the APA and knowing things are going to be challenging in terms of writing?” (P2)

“The checklists are specific, but at the beginning, I was lost.” (P3)

“I mean, you have checklists galore to follow. We know exactly what is expected.” (P4)

External Academic Resources

External academic resources included the use of Grammarly, which was used by most of the participants. Google Translate was mentioned by participant P6 who stated that it was “helpful for co-phrases.” Several students mentioned the use of outside editors who regularly worked with multilingual students. According to P3, “I did invest in an editor and there was such a big difference with me that I kept her throughout the dissertation process.”

All participants described the use of online resources for access to research support beyond the university library and to access social media for mentoring and emotional support. Representative statements included:

“I’m on the Facebook group for the university dissertation group.” (P1)

“I did go on Google, and there are a couple of times I refer to maybe YouTube videos on how to do a table or a figure or some of the prior presentations, from several universities.” (P2)

“When I write anything, I put it to Grammarly.” (P3)

“Online was more helpful because online was the thing that I use more frequently.” (P5)

Personal Resources (Self, Others, Using Models for Language or Rhetoric)

Participants shared the importance of their own ability to adapt, and several participants noted that being multilingual supported their personal adaptability. According to participant P1:

I was ready for the change. I was flexible. I was open to write a little different. I think my background too, with the masters and the bachelor's degree, was helpful for me to adapt to the changes and to identify the expectations. Maybe even because I do speak other languages, I think my brain was more adaptable to the change like, this is how I do things now.

The value of peer and family support was shared by most participants. A few examples included:

“It was more like kind of an emotional support, like reading and helping each other and you know, providing feedback.” (P1)

“I feel to save time, all the mentors and the instructor who are working at the mentor classroom, maybe they can present their work and come up with the reading and comment as a group.” (P2)

“I have three American children. So, my daughter took it upon herself—because she's a teacher—and she said, ‘OK, let me look at what you are writing.’ And she would give me the feedback.” (P3)

Participant P6 agrees:

Peer-to-peer, somebody you can relate with. I think it's just encouragement because it gets so difficult you just want to give up. To get somebody telling you, “[H]ey, I did this. I'm also from Ghana and I was able to do it.” I think that would be excellent.

Many participants reflected that SAE can be difficult to process, and they advised lots of practice and reading to get it. Participants described the value of using models of language and writing as a helpful way to compare their own writing and to review examples. Hearing the words of others was also considered helpful. Students explained:

“[It was] helpful to read through other student's dissertations for examples of how other students did it, since they got approved.” (P1)

“I did, listen to interviews, to oral defenses—those were really important resources that I was able to hear the work of students.” (P2)

Participant P3 agreed that comparing written work and listening to interviews was a key to their success:

I read a lot of American articles. The words were difficult because I would say those words differently. Comparing how they [American's] wrote their sentences, and how it sounded when I went to hear it [with] my ears (how they spoke English). I have a few friends, and I would say, “[L]et me listen to how you say this.” That is how I started to grasp what was being said.

Theme 4: Support Needed by Multilingual Students

The support that was needed by multilingual students was further described by two sub-themes: early and individualized academic writing diagnostics and multilingual support. Following are descriptions and examples of participant responses:

Early and Individualized Academic Writing Diagnostics

Participants suggested the need for early and individualized support for their academic writing, including early identification of writing problems and offering individualized resources. Most participants also described instances where feedback was not consistent across members of the academic team. Faculty usually provide content feedback while academic support team provides editorial support. According to participant P1:

Everyone is so different at university. And I know we have students literally throughout the world. Realizing that everyone's writing is different, but at the same time, every student, I believe, needs different resources. So, talking to every single student individually, in terms of what they really want to do and how they can get there, and how they're writing in the beginning.

As one example of early and individualized academic writing diagnostics, participant P2 suggested, "Maybe there could be a project reading person as a first reader." Participant P4 agreed saying, "There are links and links of support at university. Because there are tons of links to click on for support. But it's not personalized."

Multilingual Support

When asked what could be done to support multilingual students, the responses were shared by most. All noted that access to a multilingual mentor would have been helpful.

"There's something deeper. It's not just writing. It's not the chair. There's something else missing for those students. Maybe like a resource or support or someone to really identify what the problem is." (P1)

"Some form of clinic or a person who would be the go-to person to get feedback from, from the writing part." (P4)

Discussion

Participants noted that expectations for writing increased with the doctoral degree and required more detail and structure, including an understanding of SAE. The complexity of the first language also resulted in the use of additional resources like Google Translate and time for reviewing writing with dictionaries to ensure SAE conventions were being followed. These findings are consistent with the findings of Ravichandran and colleagues (2018) who stated that writing in English is structured differently than in other languages. The nature of dissertation writing required students to build evidence-based arguments as opposed to just making a statement and conveying meaning, while translating from one language to another, which created additional challenges. This was noted in responses related to the complexity of different languages and challenges in communication and code-switching.

Code-Switching

Students observed that code-switching was a way to find common ground between their native language and American English. Code-switching was represented by students as a means of survival. Code-switching was described as context dependent. Code-switching was used as a way of adapting and making sense of a foreign world when using SAE to write their dissertation instead of their native language. At first, code-switching caused anxiety, insecurity, and stress for participants. But, in time, the process of code-switching became more streamlined and automatic. This enabled students to cope with the demands of writing their dissertation in SAE. As a result, participants were more self-confident in their writing abilities and more determined to succeed.

Challenges With Vocabulary

Issues were also noted in the literature as “challenges with vocabulary,” switching between more than one language to express a concept and conveying meaning and clarity of communication in writing in the more formal academic style (Gürel Cennetkuşu, 2017; Mangan, 2023; Paul & McDonald, 2017; Wei, 2018). Participants shared that they spent more time and effort on writing than their colleagues who were native English language speakers. They said they had to pay close attention when reading articles to understand them, and it took increased effort to translate meaning into SAE when writing. The participants also shared that they were more adaptable because of being multilingual learners and that was helpful when faced with the challenges of academic writing.

The participants noted that there was inconsistency in content and writing feedback between members of the academic team, which led to confusion and feelings of frustration for the students. Gürel Cennetkuşu (2017) noted that there may be a disconnect in expectations between faculty, other members of the academic team, and the students. However, there is reason to consider that faculty may not be aware of the complexity of translating different languages in the context of academic writing. The need for understanding may also extend to other areas; for example, library searches can be more challenging when students must translate from their native language and find that keywords may be missing when formulating literature searches (Gürel Cennetkuşu, 2017).

Factors that support success were both personal and academic. Several participants shared that they were more adaptable because of being multilingual learners, and that adaptability was helpful when faced with the challenges of academic writing. The participants also described the need for additional resources beyond the faculty committee and university-provided resources. Participants used examples of completed dissertations and listened to oral defense recordings that were available. Extensive reading and hearing translated words helped improve the participants’ academic writing. Other participant resources included peers, social media, family, outside editors, and online resources for research and writing support. Multilingual editors were noted as especially helpful and recommended by our participants. Many of these sentiments are shared in the literature through recommendations to create discipline-specific multilingual writing support (CCCC, 2020).

Need for Early Diagnostics and Feedback

Participants stressed the need for early diagnostics of writing issues and earlier opportunities for editorial feedback similar to the feedback received on the final paper. Paul and McDonald (2017) described the confusion that can occur when multilingual students receive different feedback from academic support personnel and faculty. Our participants shared their own concerns about the need for consistent feedback from reviewers. In addition to consistency, there is a need for a supportive environment where students can engage in discourse about the meaning of their words in the context of SAE.

Language use and development require interaction and community. Students choose to interact with others who can support their learning (Sánchez-Martín, 2020). Building a learning network can be challenging in an online learning environment (Ravichandran et al., 2018; Tavares, 2019). The need for connection to social groups and shared experiences was described by all participants in this study. Seeking a sense of community, some students looked for peer support online while others reported finding peers within the classroom setting or by attending academic residencies. Participants also noted the importance of remaining connected to native language speakers and family for support.

In addition to the writing and research challenges, multilingual graduate students are faced with social and cultural barriers to language learning. Participants shared the importance of their language identity and the cultural connections to language. Writing was described as a way to share their culture and experiences. Their shared experiences aligned to the framework of Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory of education that

personal and social processes are interrelated with language learning. The interrelatedness of language and culture was further described by other authors (CCCC, 2020; Ravichandran et al., 2018; Singh & Jack, 2022).

Faculty were noted by all students as providing support for academic writing although that support was primarily focused on content. The literature describes the faculty committee members as the primary relationship that contributes to academic success. This interaction is an essential component; however, faculty may not be well prepared to meet the unique needs of multilingual doctoral students (CCCC, 2020; Paul & McDonald, 2017).

Limitations

Purposeful sampling of doctoral graduates from one online university may limit the generalizability to other universities. The qualitative approach provides rich data; however, the sample size was limited to six participants.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to better understand the needs of multilingual doctoral students and to provide guidance for the academic community on how to support their timely academic progress. It did not matter if the participants represented different program types or that they were from two different degree programs. The participants shared similar stories, and the messages were consistent. Not all academic settings have resources to provide specialized multilingual writing support or editorial staff, but the lessons learned here can provide some insights into ways to support these multilingual students. Key findings include the need for (a) early recognition of the writing needs of language diverse students; (b) consistency in feedback for content and writing across learning team members; (c) creating opportunities for multicultural communities and connectedness in the learning environment; (d) education of faculty members and academic support teams regarding multilingual student needs and strengths; and (e) learner support including individualized tutoring or online meetings led by someone well versed on translation difficulties.

Understanding the additional efforts required by these students and having sensitivity to the challenges of translating from their first language to academic English is important, as is awareness—on the part of faculty or other academic skill/writing support staff—about how language use feedback and editing can feel personal when meanings are changed. Raising awareness and providing support may facilitate timely academic progress. It will be important to expand the current work to include other learner groups who may also have a need for academic support for language diversity and to consider how the results of this study can impact current changes in the provision of academic support and faculty development.

We need further study and new conversations about how faculty and others in the academic community can help graduate students preserve and share their identity in their writing. The goal is to create an environment that supports language diversity and inclusion for everyone in the academic community.

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