

# Experiences of Publishing in English: Vietnamese Doctoral Students' Challenges and Strategies

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**Abstract:** Writing for publication in English-medium refereed academic journals can be a challenging task for doctoral students who use English as an Additional Language (EAL). Limited research, however, has been conducted in the Australian context to explore this practice among EAL doctoral students. Adopting a qualitative research approach with semi-structured interviews for data collection, this study aims to investigate the experiences of seven Vietnamese international students studying doctoral programs in Australian universities when writing for publication in English. Particularly, it seeks to find out what challenges this group of students encountered and the strategies they employed for scholarly publishing. The results show that these Vietnamese students faced similar linguistic and rhetorical challenges in scholarly writing with other groups of EAL doctoral students. Yet, some of their difficulties (for example, linguistic bias in journal gatekeeping, power inequality between co-authors) as well as some of their adopted strategies, are quite different from those of students in non-Anglophone contexts. It is possible that the close connection to the English-based academic discourse community gives Vietnamese students more confidence than those in non-Anglophone contexts. This study provides practical recommendations for writing support programs for this cohort of doctoral students in Australian universities.

## Introduction

Writing for publication can benefit doctoral students and their fields of knowledge. A portfolio of successful publications increases their job opportunities upon graduation (Kamler, 2008) and helps them achieve “professional visibility” necessary for academic career development (Dinham & Scott, 2001, p. 45). In addition, disseminating research results in peer-reviewed journals helps contribute new knowledge to one’s fields of study (Cho, 2004). Given the benefits of scholarly publication, doctoral students are increasingly expected to publish before graduation. Many doctoral programs even require scholarly publications as a condition for graduation (Cheung, 2010; Gosden, 1996; Lei & Chuang, 2009; Li, 2016).

However, writing for publication may be a challenging task for many students, who are usually novice scholarly writers, because it requires familiarity with linguistic and rhetorical conventions, as well as disciplinary content knowledge and methodologies (Hyland, 2011). Past empirical

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evidence has indicated that most doctoral students had never written for publication before, and they were unfamiliar with the discipline-specific writing conventions (Maher, Feldon, Timmerman, & Chao, 2014; Song, 2014) and genres (Cho, 2004; Li, 2007; Song, 2014).

As English has become a dominant language in academic publishing (Hyland, 2015), publishing in English has become a very efficient way to disseminate research results to global academic communities (Uzuner, 2008), but this presents additional challenges for English as an Additional Language (EAL) doctoral students because they have to meet the English language standards required by journals in addition to following disciplinary writing conventions. In order to explore the practices of writing for publication among these students, many studies have been conducted (see, for example, Cheung, 2010; Cho, 2004; Ferreira, 2015; Flowerdew, 2000; Gosden, 1996; Huang, 2010; Langum & Sullivan, 2017; Li, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Song, 2014). Nevertheless, previous studies were mostly conducted in various non-Anglophone contexts (for example, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Sweden, and Brazil) and Anglophone contexts such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Cho, 2004; Shaw, 1991; Simpson, 2013; Song, 2014). The academic publishing efforts of EAL doctoral students in other Anglophone contexts, such as Australia, have been under-researched<sup>1</sup> (Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, & Burgin, 2012).

In Australia, institutional research funding is partly based on doctoral students' publication output (Jackson, 2013). Although doctoral students are increasingly expected to publish during candidature (Lee & Kamler, 2008), the publication output is low among these students (Kamler, 2008). Therefore, a deeper understanding about the actual writing practice among doctoral students is needed (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Cotterall, 2011; Kamler, 2008). This current study examines the practices of writing for scholarly publication of seven Vietnamese doctoral students in Australia through investigating their challenges and strategies for successful publication.

The motivation to conduct this study among Vietnamese doctoral students was because this cohort of students is under-examined and it still remains unknown if their experiences are similar or different from other linguistic groups, such as, Chinese (Cheung, 2010; Li, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007), Japanese (Gosden, 1996), Taiwanese (Huang, 2010), Thai (Tardy, 2005), Indonesian (Cotterall, 2011), Brazilian (Ferreira, 2015), and Swedish (Langum & Sullivan, 2017). Also, given the large number of Vietnamese international students in Australian universities,<sup>2</sup> an investigation of their academic learning experiences will help inform universities and policy makers in providing appropriate academic support for this cohort of students.

### **Challenges of EAL Doctoral Students in International Publishing**

Previous research has shown that EAL doctoral students have encountered numerous challenges when writing for scholarly publication in English. Hyland (2015) pointed out the importance of linguistic skills in writing for scholarly publication and emphasized that difficulties with "lexis and syntax certainly complicate the task for EAL authors" (p. 59). Specific language problems reported include: lack of general and discipline-specific vocabulary, inappropriate use of grammatical features, and low facility with English expression (Cho, 2004; Langum & Sullivan, 2017; Li, 2005; Song, 2014). Writing for publication in English, hence, is also a "laborious" process for EAL doctoral students. Li's (2006a) longitudinal study of a Chinese doctoral physics student showed that his manuscript had undergone six revisions and three resubmissions before it was finally accepted for publication. Linguistic difficulties also led some students to restrict themselves to quantitative research as they thought quantitative research was easier to report and less linguistically demanding than qualitative research, as reported by four EAL doctoral students in Cho's (2004) study.

In addition to linguistic difficulties during the writing process, some EAL doctoral students received unfavourable comments from journal editors/reviewers on their non-standard language use, which made these students feel that they were discriminated against by journal gatekeepers (Flowerdew, 2000; Huang, 2010). However, different findings have been reported in Cho (2004), where none of the participants reported such linguistic bias. EAL doctoral students in Cheung's (2010) study even thought that reviewers and editors were very "supportive" and "sympathetic," even though they have language problems in their writing (p. 140). These inconsistent findings in the literature point to the need for further research.

In addition to linguistic difficulties, EAL doctoral students face additional challenges that are caused by rhetorical differences between their first languages (L1) and English (L2). From the perspective of contrastive rhetoric, each culture has its own writing style and rhetorical conventions, and one person's first language and culture may affect her/his writing in another language (Connor, 1996). Previous studies (see, for example, Cotterall, 2011; Ferreira, 2015; Li, 2005, 2006a; Shaw, 1991; Song, 2014; Tardy, 2005) have demonstrated that the mismatch between the discursive traditions and cultural values of EAL doctoral students and those of English-based core disciplinary communities leads to rhetorical weakness in their research writing. In addition, this difficulty is also caused by the lack of rhetorical knowledge on advanced academic literacy among some EAL doctoral students. For example, Tardy (2005) reported that a Thai doctoral student, in his early candidature, was unsure about how to convince the readers of the significance of his work. However, after more extensive reading, writing and participation in disciplinary writing activities, he finally developed the skills and started thinking of writing as a tool to convey persuasive ideas.

### **Strategies Employed by EAL Doctoral Students in International Publishing**

Previous literature has also identified strategies that are adopted by EAL doctoral students when writing for publication in English. The most common strategy is co-authoring with their supervisors. Although co-authoring brings many advantages, such as sharing workload, exchanging ideas, and linguistic assistance, problems may occur when students co-author with their supervisors. A Japanese scholar in a study by Casanave (1998), who co-authored with her former U.S. supervisor, experienced an uncomfortable position at times when she had to decide "who would be listed as first author, who would draft and revise, and generally how to balance the work of preparing an article for publication" (p. 191). Taiwanese doctoral students (N=11) in Huang's (2010) study depended on their supervisors for research funds and equipment, so they described their relationship with their supervisors as that of an "employer-employee relationship." As the supervisors' roles were so powerful, these students felt they lost a degree of control and responsibility for their work. They also lost motivation to learn and improve necessary research writing skills. Even though these students did the research and wrote the manuscripts, they always had to seek approval from supervisors before submission, and their supervisors would always remain as the corresponding authors. Similar findings about unequal power relationships were reported in Li's (2016) study in which publication was a graduation requirement and it created high pressure for doctoral students to publish. They had to co-author with their supervisors and be "humble and tactful" when asking their supervisor to revise their novice drafts into publishable papers (Li, 2016, p. 550).

In order to improve the overall quality of their writing, EAL doctoral students seek linguistic assistance on their manuscripts before submitting them for publication (see, for example, Cheung, 2010; Cho, 2004; Li & Flowerdew, 2007). EAL doctoral students in Anglophone contexts may seek linguistic assistance from native English speakers (NESs). For example, two EAL doctoral students in Cho's (2004) study sought assistance from NES co-authors and expressed satisfaction with their

co-authors' linguistic assistance while two other students had their final drafts proofread by NES university writing advisors. However, both students realized that the assistance was very limited because the advisors lacked time and the necessary disciplinary knowledge. For those who reside in non-Anglophone contexts, such as China and Hong Kong, because of the unavailability of NESs as well as professional editorial services, their main sources of editorial assistance come from their EAL supervisors, peers, and English language teachers (Li & Flowerdew, 2007; Luo & Hyland, 2016). However, as each of these sources has its own strengths and weaknesses, Li and Flowerdew (2007) recommended that language professionals, subject experts, and academic journals should collaborate to help EAL doctoral students overcome the English language barrier in international publication.

Translating from L1 into L2 is another common strategy adopted by EAL doctoral students (see, for example, Gosden, 1996; Li, 2005, 2007; Shaw, 1991; Song, 2014). Thirteen out of 16 Japanese PhD students interviewed by Gosden (1996) reported translating their research articles into English due to their lack of confidence in writing research papers directly in English. Chinese doctoral students in Li (2005, 2007) and Song (2014) also reported relying on L1-L2 translation at the beginning of their writing process. In addition, published articles in prestigious or target journals are used as a source of linguistic and rhetorical assistance for EAL doctoral students (Cheung, 2010; Li, 2007; Okamura, 2006; Song, 2014). Extensive reading of research articles in English helps them maintain a collection of useful linguistic forms and then internalize these forms for later use in their own articles. This strategy may help reduce some of the burden encountered by EAL novice scholars when writing in English as well as avoiding L1-L2 translation. However, in order to become successful scholars, Okamura (2006) suggests that EAL novice scholars need to develop language-oriented strategies such as thinking and writing in English, or frequent contact with English native scholars to acquire a native-like sensitivity to the English language.

Contextual factors are important when examining EAL doctoral students' academic publishing experiences. In terms of challenges in writing for publication in English, EAL doctoral students encountered similar difficulties in language and rhetoric, regardless of their location in Anglophone contexts (see, for example, Cho, 2004; Song, 2014) or non-Anglophone contexts (see, for example, Gosden, 1996; Huang, 2010; Li, 2005). However, there are differences in some other challenges encountered by EAL students in Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts, such as journal gatekeepers' attitudes and supervisor-supervisee unequal power relations. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research in various contexts and among different groups of EAL doctoral students in order to provide further insights into this topic. This study aims to make contributions to this line of inquiry by examining the practices of writing for publication in English among Vietnamese doctoral students currently enrolled in Australian universities.

## Method

The participants were seven Vietnamese students, aged between 27 and 39, enrolled in full-time doctoral programs at four Australian universities. One participant had just completed his PhD while the others were in their third or fourth year. The participants came from social sciences and sciences disciplines. Their International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores were between 6.0 and 7.0 before the commencement of doctoral programs. Three participants were exempted from IELTS testing as their Master's programs were in English. There were two criteria for recruiting participants for this study. First, they needed to have had experiences of submitting articles to academic peer-reviewed journals and received comments from reviewers and editors. Second, they needed to be Vietnamese international students enrolled in full-time doctoral

programs in Australia. All participants were the lead authors of their papers which were either sole-authored or co-authored. See Table 1 for the profiles of the participants.

**Table 1: Profiles of Participants**

Participants <sup>3</sup>	Discipline	Year of candidature	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	IELTS test score	No. of publications <sup>4</sup>
S1	Criminology	3rd year	Vietnam	Australia	Not attempted	4
S2	Biomedical Engineering	Just completed	Vietnam	Vietnam	6.5	3
S3	Tele-communication	2nd year	Vietnam	Vietnam	6.0	2
S4	Information Technology	3rd year	Vietnam	Thailand	Not attempted	1
S5	Environmental Engineering	3rd year	Vietnam	Vietnam	6.5	1
S6	Law	4th year	Vietnam	Vietnam	7.0	2
S7	Education	3rd year	Vietnam	U.S.	Not attempted	1

Seven semi-structured individual interviews, which lasted about 30 minutes, were conducted with ethics approval from the researchers' institution. The interview questions (see Appendix) were developed based on the findings of previous studies<sup>5</sup> (see, for example, Cho, 2004; Flowerdew, 1999; Huang, 2010) and some other issues that are considered to be important by the researchers, such as their perceptions of co-authoring with supervisors and their opinions on editors/reviewers' comments. Although pre-determined questions were asked, probes were also used to elicit further information from participants. Participants were also encouraged to add more information through the final open-ended question. Although this study depends solely on what participants remembered about their writing-for-publication process and their perceptions of some issues (for example, the feedback they received when submitting articles for publication), such information is valuable because it indicates "the participant's own experience and understanding of the publishing process – that is, what they felt was important to them" (Cho, 2004, p. 54). Participants were recruited through the Facebook group of Vietnamese doctoral students studying in Australia. Six interviews were conducted face-to-face and the other through Facetime. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to enable the participants to express their ideas freely.

Qualitative content analysis was adopted using a systematic coding process. As prior knowledge regarding the publishing practices of Vietnamese doctoral students is very limited, an inductive approach to data analysis was adopted, with themes directly emerging from the data (Cho & Lee, 2014). Pre-determined categories were also used, such as challenges and strategies, co-authoring, and editors/reviewers' comments. Constant comparative method, in which data was repetitively and systematically examined, was also employed (Merriam, 1998). To increase the reliability of the coding, 10% of the interview transcripts were coded independently by a second coder, using the coding frame developed by the researchers. Any discrepancies between the coded items were discussed by the coders in a meeting. The inter-coder agreement rate was 85.72%.

## Results

### Challenges Encountered in International Publishing

#### *Displaying Logical Thinking*

When asked about the challenges encountered when writing research articles in English, six out of seven participants reported that they had problems with logical thinking. S3 and S5 reported that they still kept the habit of thinking in Vietnamese when composing in English. This habit, however, made it difficult for the reader, especially NESs, to understand what they were trying to say. Similarly, S4 admitted that he often wrote “with his own logic” (that is, a particularly Vietnamese logical way of thinking): whenever a new idea came up in his mind, he just inserted it, even though the idea did “not stick to the main idea of the paragraph.” As a result, it was difficult for the reader to follow his argument. S6 thought that he could overcome surface language problems, such as grammar and vocabulary, but encountered a greater challenge related to logical thinking. He shared a memorable comment that he received from one of the reviewers as follows:

S6: I remembered one reviewer saying that I wrote a paragraph just like Alice in Wonderland. It means I wrote that paragraph just like a sleepwalker so he could not understand what I really meant. Therefore, I learnt a lesson that keeping our paper clear and easy to understand is very important. We always want to read something that is easy to understand, even for native speakers.

S2 also shared that his biggest challenge when writing for publication was how to structure or present his ideas in order to create a “flow” and “logic” in his papers. He emphasized the importance of displaying logic in the following excerpt:

S2: As the authors, we have the disciplinary knowledge. It is easy for us to understand our paper, whether we start from 1 to 2 or 2 to 1. But for those who do not have disciplinary knowledge, they need to move from this step to another step, so they expect that our paper will follow a logic.

As can be seen, these participants had difficulty with logical expressions and they tended to attribute this difficulty to their habit of thinking in Vietnamese that caused them to write in a format that suited Vietnamese better than it suited English construction. This will be explained in more detail later in the paper.

#### *Using Language to Highlight Research Contribution*

Six out of seven participants in this study thought that the decisive factor for a paper to be accepted by a journal was its contribution to the existing knowledge of the field, rather than the language itself:

S4: Language may not be a big problem but our contribution to the journal is very important.

S5: I think the difficulty is that we need to write in a way that makes the readers see the novelty of our research in order to be accepted.

S7: I think the most difficulty is our ideas. In other words, what we want to write or contribute through our paper rather than the language difficulties.

However, participants reported difficulty in highlighting the contribution of their papers and two of them attributed their difficulty to linguistic limitations. S3 and S4 noted that, despite their understanding of the contribution of their research, their language was not effective enough to emphasize it:

S4: When I do my research, I understand its contribution. But when I express it in English, my language may reduce the contribution of research or make readers misunderstand or not fully understand.

S3: The others had their own research directions which were different from mine, but my writing was not effective enough to make my research distinctive from others [other researchers' papers].<sup>6</sup>

Their difficulty in highlighting the significance of their research may explain why these participants considered the Introduction/Literature Review and Discussion to be the most challenging sections to write. This seems to be reasonable as these sections require the authors to “create a research niche” (Swales, 1990) by making rhetorical moves: situating their work within a research context, indicating the gaps in the current literature, creating a research space for their own work, and promoting its significance and value. S3 revealed that in some papers that he co-authored with supervisors, his supervisors were in charge of writing the Introduction section and he wrote the other sections. He noted, “If I write that section, everything will be destroyed.” He revealed that a recent paper that he wrote by himself was rejected and the reviewers commented that the Introduction section was “too general” for them to see the contribution of his research.

As can be seen, although six out of seven participants thought that the contribution of a paper to a discipline was more significant than language itself, they admitted having difficulty using language to highlight or emphasize the contribution of their research; the most challenging sections for them to write were the Introduction/Literature Review and Discussion sections.

### ***Receiving Negative Comments on Language***

When being asked how they perceived feedback from the journals, most of the participants reported that reviewers often gave general comments on their language, such as “my writing is not very well, just good” (S4), “my writing was not really good enough” (S6), “my English was not good” (S5), “many grammatical errors” (S2), “there are many errors” (S3). However, none of the participants reported that language was the major reason for their paper rejections or that the journal gatekeepers were prejudiced against their research due to their non-native English-speaking status.

S1 mentioned that, among the reasons for his paper rejections, language accounted for only 30–40%. For example, one reviewer stated that there was inconsistency in his language use: his first paragraph was written in British English, while his second paragraph was written in American English. However, he thought that comments from reviewers were not too negative. Similarly, S4 stated that reviewers' comments on his manuscript were quite “constructive and accurate,” and he

agreed with them. Although S6 had his first paper rejected 6–7 times by different journals, he did not think that language was the reason for his paper rejection. He reported that the reviewers just commented about the content of the paper and most of them did not comment on his writing. S5 had his paper rejected right in the first submission and he received negative comments from the reviewers on his language use as well as the overall structure of the paper. His supervisor told him that when the reviewers saw his name,<sup>7</sup> they would have known that he was a non-native speaker and that they might have been critical of his language. Although S5's supervisor held that perception, S5 did not think that language was the main reason leading to the rejection of his paper, as he stated below:

S5: I think the major reason for their rejection was the content because this was the most important part of any paper. The reviewers thought that my content was not significant enough.

## Strategies Used for Publishing in English

### *Co-Authoring with Supervisors*

While all of science participants reported co-authoring with their supervisors in their papers, only one out of three social science students did that. It seemed that co-authoring with supervisors gave these participants certain benefits. S5 revealed that he received substantial support from his supervisor throughout every step of the publishing process. He thought that he could not have published the first paper without his supervisor's support, as he did not have any publishing experience at that time. S2 and S4 reported learning practical tips in preparing manuscripts from their supervisors, such as, keeping language clear and simple, or writing with audience in mind.

For S2, co-authoring with his supervisor also taught him the necessary skills to negotiate with the journal gatekeepers when facing a paper rejection. He revealed that his first paper received two major revisions and as a rule of that journal, his paper should have been rejected. One of the reviewers gave negative comments on S2's writing, and yet that reviewer made language errors in his own comments. Therefore, his supervisor used this as evidence to persuade the editor to reconsider the paper. Finally, the editor agreed to let S2 resubmit his paper and after four submissions, his paper was finally accepted for publication.

In contrast, two social science participants, S1 and S6, did not employ the strategy of co-authoring with their supervisors. S6 said that, in his discipline (Law), it was not necessary for doctoral students to co-author with their supervisors, and most students were autonomous and independent. S1 thought that supervisors might not want to co-author with students in average-level journals because of supervisors' "high ranking." This feeling may have arisen from his supervisor's rejection of co-authorship, and subsequent instruction to be "independent." Additionally, both participants mentioned their supervisors' "heavy workloads" as the reason why they did not receive much feedback or instruction on their writing. However, S1 still sought advice from his supervisor during the publishing process. He thought that supervisors were always willing to help as long as students were "active and autonomous." He also reported that he would co-author with his supervisor in the next two papers aimed for high-ranking journals. Similarly, although S6 did not co-author with his supervisor, his supervisor contributed to the content and structure of his papers:



S6: [E]ach of my papers is a chapter of my thesis. So right from the beginning, my supervisor and I shaped the ideas and structure for each chapter. He also gave his comments and contributed ideas for each of these chapters.

For those who co-authored, none claimed that they had any trouble in working with their supervisors. S4 and S5 were aware that they were at an “inferior” position compared with their supervisors. Despite his “inferior” feeling, S5 still believed that the benefits he gained outweighed the disadvantages. S5 explained that, when he and his supervisor had disagreements on research matters, this opened up a discussion. If he could support his opinion, his supervisor would listen to him. Otherwise, he would have to follow his supervisor’s suggestion. However, S5 did not think that this “inferior” position brought any problems when co-authoring, and the benefits in co-authorship outweighed the disadvantages.

In general, all the participants who co-authored with supervisors seemed to benefit in some way from this strategy. It not only helped participants learn the ropes of academic publishing but also taught them how to be robust when facing rejection. Although S4 and S5 perceived their “inferior” position in relation to their supervisors, they did not think that this position brought them problems when co-authoring.

### *Writing with Audience in Mind*

Participants’ responses showed awareness of the importance of making their writing readable and understandable to the audience. This awareness came from their experience of writing for publication and working as reviewers.

In the following extract, S2 explained the significance of writing with the audience in mind from his experience as a reviewer. This is important when the reader does not have the same disciplinary knowledge as the author:

S2: As we have disciplinary knowledge, it is easy for us to understand our paper, whether we start from 1 to 2 or 2 to 1. But for those who do not, they need to move from this step to another step, so they expect that our paper will follow a logic. For reviewers, nothing can be sure that he is an “expert” in our discipline. When there are not enough reviewers, the journal can send our paper to those who are not in the same discipline with us . . .

### *Being Clear in Writing*

S2 noted that, as a reviewer himself, he was “happy” with understandable papers which did not waste his time, commenting that “the best paper is the most understandable one.” When he was tired or had a headache, he would “throw away” papers which were “messy” and “difficult to understand.” Similarly, as a reviewer, S3 said that he would reject a paper right away if the author used too complicated language for him to understand.

With that in mind, participants tried to keep their writing as simple and understandable to the readers as much as possible. When a reviewer commented that S6 wrote a paragraph like Alice in Wonderland, he worked out that using too complicated language is not a good idea. Rather, keeping papers clear and easy to understand is very important:

S6: We need to write in a way that readers can understand clearly. We do not need to write in a too complicated way. Just keep it simple . . . We always want to read something easy to understand, even for native speakers.

S4 revealed that he often learnt about the editorial board of the target journal before writing because this would affect how he wrote. He explained that knowing the editorial board of the target journal helped him develop a sense of the target audience and their preferred language style. He noted that customising writing according to the preferred style of a specific intended audience would help the writer “get the sympathy” from the audience.

### **Paraphrasing**

One common strategy used among the science participants was paraphrasing. All of them were aware of the importance of paraphrasing in research writing. S2 emphasized the importance of paraphrasing as follows:

S2: Our paper must be original; hence, we cannot copy an exact sentence from any other paper. Every sentence must be paraphrased, we must switch the words. Terminologies can be kept but sentences cannot be the same. I see many people having papers rejected due to this reason. So, we cannot be lazy.

S2 and S3 further revealed that one of their strategies when writing the Literature Review section was that they would read some highly relevant papers, identify the main ideas and details in the Literature Review sections of these papers, and rephrase the content in their own words. S2 explained that this strategy would help him save the time of structuring ideas in his Literature Review section because those papers had been reviewed already. Moreover, the reviewers would feel pleased with his writing, as they were familiar with such structure.

While all the science participants in this study reported using paraphrasing as one of their strategies, none of the social science participants mentioned using this writing skill. The general finding in this section may shed light on possible differences in the writing-for-publication practices of two groups of participants.

### **Translating from L1**

None of the participants in this study adopted translation as their writing strategy. They explained that writing papers in Vietnamese and then translating in English was “time-consuming” (S3, S5, S6) and “not necessary” (S6). Additionally, it would have negative influences on L2 writing performance, “slow[ing] down language reaction” (S4) and “constrain[ing] the development of writing competence” (S7). Moreover, as there were differences between English and Vietnamese (for example, word usage, syntax, patterns of thinking), S3 and S5 believed that translating from Vietnamese into English was not always correct and hence the original meaning would be lost. Interestingly, S2 reported that he did not use L1-L2 translation as a strategy because his Vietnamese writing was now similar to English writing:

S2: Now my Vietnamese writing is nearly the same as English writing. It has similar structure, with topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph and then followed by supporting sentence. As I have written in English a lot since I move here, I got accustomed to it.

Although translation is a strategy adopted by many EAL doctoral students in non-Anglophone contexts, none of the participants reported using L1-L2 translation due to their awareness of its time-consuming nature, and the negative effects it had on their L2 writing.

## Discussion

This study aims to investigate the challenges and strategies of writing for publication in English among a group of Vietnamese doctoral students in Australia. The results show that these students had quite similar linguistic and rhetorical difficulties as other EAL doctoral students reported in the literature. However, some of their difficulties, such as journal gatekeepers' prejudices or unequal power relations between supervisors and supervisees, and some of their adopted strategies, were quite different from other groups of EAL doctoral students.

In terms of challenges, participants reported that thinking in Vietnamese made it difficult for the reader to understand their writing. Moreover, they found it hard to write the Introduction, Literature Review and Discussion sections of an article. They also reported receiving negative comments from reviewers on their language. However, none of them thought that they were discriminated against due to their non-standard language. They also did not think that language was the main reason for their paper rejection. In order to improve the overall quality and readability of their manuscripts, they adopted strategies such as co-authoring with supervisors, writing with audience in mind, being clear in writing, and paraphrasing.

The results of this study showed that different thinking patterns between Vietnamese and English are a source of difficulty for Vietnamese doctoral students when composing in English. According to Phan (2011) and Ho (2011), ideas are presented in the English language through a method of "going directly to the point" or proceeding in a "linear" direction; in contrast, Vietnamese writing has an "indirect" or "circular" approach, which is influenced by the way Vietnamese people construct knowledge, not critically and directly but circularly and indirectly, to show respect and tactfulness. The following is an example of a nonlinear pattern in Vietnamese writing (Ho, 2011). This organizational style makes Vietnamese writing seem more disconnected, harder to follow, and less persuasive than English writing. In this example, the writer starts by giving point A and then moves to point B. He then justifies point B by giving point C and D. Then, he returns to point B and point A. Meanwhile, English writers may present this argument in a more linear way by starting from point A, then move to point B, C, D. Then, they would start a new line of argument, rather than coming back to this argument again:

Con đường học tập là con đường gian nan, khổ ải nhưng cuối con đường là ánh sáng, là tương lai. [The learning road is rough (point A) but it leads to a bright future (point B)]. Có học vấn, con người mới có điều kiện làm chủ thiên nhiên, xã hội, nhất là làm chủ vận mệnh của mình. [Equipped with knowledge, humans are able to control nature and decide their own fate (point C)]. Trên cơ sở ấy, đời sống vật chất và tinh thần mới được nâng cao [Based on that, the living standard can be improved (point D)]. Học vấn cần thiết đối với con người như vậy nhưng con đường đến với học vấn quả là gian nan, vất vả [Learning is very important to humans (point B), but the learning road is really rough and difficult (point A)]. (Ho, 2011, p. 218).

The same problem has also been reported by other groups of EAL students, such as those from China (e.g., Song, 2014), Hong Kong (e.g., Flowerdew, 1999), Indonesia (e.g., Cotterall, 2011), Thailand (e.g., Tardy, 2005), Korea (e.g., Song, 2014), and Sweden (e.g., Langum & Sullivan, 2017). These results further demonstrate that the writer's first language and culture does influence his/her writing in a second language (Connor, 1996; Kaplan, 1966; Purves, 1988).

Vietnamese doctoral students' difficulty in using language to write Introductions, Literature Reviews and Discussion sections, and emphasize the importance of their work, was also shared by

novice EAL doctoral students in Cho's (2004), Li's (2005, 2006a, 2006b) and Song's (2014) studies. This difficulty among EAL authors tended to be attributed to their lack of scholarly writing expertise, rather than their language status. For example, an editor quoted in Flowerdew (2001) emphasized that this problem was not particular to non-native speakers:

I don't think that (difficulty) is related to NSs and NNSs. It is more the experience and the skill and the purpose of the authors. The skilled, experienced authors seem to know how to do it, and they have done it. The inexperienced author, who may be an NNS or an NS, often is learning how to do that. (p. 136)

This is further supported by Habibie's (2015) study, which found that Canadian Anglophone novice scholars also struggled with making knowledge claims and found the Introduction and Discussion sections to be the most difficult to write for journal articles. This writing difficulty was also shared by L1 writers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) areas as reported by Emerson (2017). Therefore, it may be a common difficulty shared by doctoral students, irrespective of whether they are L1 or L2 English users. Two participants (S3 and S4) thought that this was caused by their limited English language proficiency. This finding revealed that linguistic barriers might also lead to rhetorical weakness in Vietnamese doctoral writing, in addition to L1-L2 rhetorical differences, as argued by Connor (1996).

In order to increase the quality of their writing and get their papers published, these Vietnamese doctoral students have adopted strategies such as co-authoring with supervisors, writing with audience in mind, being clear in writing, and paraphrasing. The results demonstrated that some of their strategies are somehow different from those adopted by other EAL doctoral students in non-Anglophone contexts. For example, none of the Vietnamese students in this study reported using L1-L2 translation. They were well aware of the negative effects of translation on their L2 writing performance. This result may suggest that the positive influences of an English-speaking environment led them to seek out other strategies, such as co-authoring with supervisors, or paraphrasing, rather than relying on L1-L2 translation. Unlike Japanese novice researchers in Gosden's (1996) and Okamura's (2006) studies in which participants did not consider readership when writing for publication, the participants in this study wrote with an audience in mind and hence, tried to make their writing readable and understandable to the audience. This difference may be attributed to their advantage of being directly engaged with the centre-based scientific community, as Okamura (2006) claimed that the close connection with the centre researchers as well as interactions with other researchers in the global network seemed to raise more awareness of the readership among EAL authors.

Unlike some EAL doctoral students in non-Anglophone contexts who believed that the journal gatekeepers discriminated against them for any non-standard language uses (Flowerdew, 2000; Huang, 2010), no participant in this study shared the same view. This finding is in accord with Cho's (2004) study which revealed that none of the surveyed EAL doctoral students in the U.S. context felt to be prejudiced by journal gatekeepers. Moreover, while many EAL doctoral students reported unequal power problems when co-authoring with their supervisors (e.g., Li, 2006a; Li, 2016; Song, 2014; Huang, 2010), the participants in this study did not experience the same problems mentioned in the literature. It is possible that the Vietnamese doctoral students in this study did not have to depend on their supervisor to meet their graduation requirements because they were not required to publish as a condition for their PhD programs, unlike the Chinese doctoral students in Li (2016) who "chose to defer to the authority" of their supervisor during the publishing process (p. 554). In addition, as scholarship holders, they did not have to rely on their supervisors for research funding or research equipment, unlike students in Li (2006), Huang (2010), and Hyland (2015). In this

study, even though two participants were aware of their “inferior” status compared with their supervisors, they did not think that this position posed any problems when co-authoring with them. This may be due to the belief that teachers are at a superior position and students tend to defer to the wisdom of the teachers in Vietnamese culture.

Although this study did not aim to compare academic publishing experiences between science students and social science students due to its small sample size, the results nevertheless revealed some differences in their publishing practices. While all the science participants co-authored with their supervisors, only one social science participant had co-authored with her supervisor. This result is in agreement with Heath’s (2002) and Kamler’s (2008) findings that science doctoral students published more papers throughout their candidature and included their supervisors as co-authors more often than those in humanities and social sciences. This may suggest that co-authoring is a more popular practice among science disciplines, and that science doctoral students seem to receive more support from their supervisors throughout their publishing process. Moreover, while all of the science participants reported using paraphrasing as one of their writing strategies, none of the social science students did the same. A possible explanation for this might be that these science participants were aware of the formulaic nature of scientific English, which “applies all the way up from the word to the phrase and from the individual communicative moves or functions to the overall rhetorical structure,” hence, scientific English is likely to be “susceptible to imitation/recycling and difficult to master” (Flowerdew & Li, 2007, p. 460). Another possible explanation for this is the separation of work/content and language/form in scientific writing,<sup>8</sup> which is in contrast with social sciences and humanities writing, where language and facts “go hand in hand,” and “where language constructs reality” (Flowerdew & Li, 2007, p. 461).

## Conclusion

This study reported challenges encountered by Vietnamese doctoral students when writing for publication in English, and the strategies they adopted to get their papers published. As these students have language-related challenges, it suggests that further language support is needed to help these students overcome their challenges on their way to successful publication. For example, individual consultations at department levels may be helpful for this cohort of students when they wish to obtain feedback on their manuscripts and have their papers polished before submission (Ma, 2017).

The data also shows the importance of developing rhetorical knowledge among doctoral students. Writing for publication is, in fact, a rhetorical act in which writers have to persuade readers of the significance and value of their own words. However, at graduate level, doctoral students often struggle with this issue for the first time (Tardy, 2005). Therefore, academic writing courses at the graduate level in general, and writing-for-publication courses in particular, should focus on developing students’ rhetorical knowledge, an important aspect of advanced academic literacy.

This study reveals that participants benefit from co-authoring with their supervisors, which helped them learn the academic publishing ropes and move through the challenges and anxieties of first publication attempts. As the supervisory support varies between disciplines, this suggests that these emerging scholars need to be supported in more strategic and generous ways so that they can become confident scholarly writers upon graduation. This, however, requires greater support at the institutional/university level so that supervisors can promote their crucial role in inducting doctoral students into disciplinary writing practices as well as increasing the publication output of doctoral students.

A limitation of this study is its small sample size of Vietnamese doctoral students in Australia, which does not allow for the generalisation of findings. Further research, hence, may recruit a larger number of participants from various disciplines, to enable comparison and contrast between students of different disciplines. Another limitation is the focus on discursive challenges of Vietnamese doctoral students and the strategies they adopted when writing for publication in English. It would be worthwhile investigating non-discursive challenges because students' challenges may not be limited to language only. Future research should also collect data from multiple sources (for example, surveys and documents related to publishing processes) to provide a more comprehensive view of this issue.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Australia, doctoral programs are often based on research only, without any coursework component.
- <sup>2</sup> According to the Department of Education and Training, Vietnam is the fifth largest contributor of international students in the Australian higher education sector, with 12,438 enrolments in the first half of 2017 (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017)
- <sup>3</sup> Participants are labelled from S1 to S7 for identity protection.
- <sup>4</sup> Only publications with the participants listed as the first author were counted.
- <sup>5</sup> Questions 1, 2, and 5 were developed from Cho's (2004) study; questions 3, 4, and 6 were from Flowerdew's (1999) study; questions 7 and 9 were from Huang's (2010) study; and questions 8 and 10 were developed by the authors of this paper.
- <sup>6</sup> The information in square brackets is added by the authors to provide a reference of the words used by the participant.
- <sup>7</sup> Some journals in Engineering Disciplines (where S5 comes from) operate a single blind review process, in which the reviewer knows who the author is, but the author does not know who the reviewer is.
- <sup>8</sup> The scientific community may put the primary concern on the content of the paper rather than its language in evaluating a paper (Flowerdew & Li, 2007).



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