



# THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CRITICAL VOICE IN THE WRITING OF INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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International postgraduate students from non-English speaking backgrounds are sometimes highly regarded experts who are experienced writers of academic genres in their first language. It can be very difficult for them to maintain that expert identity in their writing in English as they are often uncertain about what is an appropriate voice to adopt as a student in a western academic environment. Their lack of familiarity with the expectations of their new discourse communities makes it particularly difficult for them to write reviews of the literature where they need to express critical evaluation and to make appeals to values shared with their readers. These difficulties are demonstrated in a case study of an Indonesian postgraduate student in the Engineering Faculty at Monash University. Issues in the development of a critical voice in this student's writing are discussed.

**Keywords:** writer's voice, international postgraduate students, critical evaluation

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## Introduction

Many international students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) are confronted with significant challenges in the writing they need to do in their postgraduate studies in Australia. These students are sometimes experts in their fields and experienced writers of academic genres in their first languages but they may be unfamiliar with the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of western academic genres. They may be unsure about the identity they are expected to adopt as writer in English and "the expected relationship between themselves as researchers and writers and their readers" (Crosling & Vance, forthcoming). They may find it particularly difficult to adopt an appropriate critical voice in their written work.

The literature review is one genre where the writer needs to adopt a critical voice. The literature review by convention requires the writer to justify the need for their own research by critically evaluating previous research, and many students including international students find it difficult to express evaluation. In an examination of what evaluation means in written discourse, Hunston (1994) argues that expressing evaluation in a text involves both a statement of personal judgement and an appeal to shared norms and values, and she establishes that in academic writing this appeal is to shared values about what constitutes knowledge. Using Hunston's analysis, it is clear that expressing evaluation demands that the writer has a clear understanding of acceptable practices of expressing personal judgement in "objective" academic texts and that the writer is confident enough to appeal to values they believe they share with their readers.

International students may find it difficult to achieve both these aspects of evaluation in a literature review. As they are working in a second language, they may not have the linguistic resources to express personal judgement appropriately. More importantly, if they come from educational systems and cultural backgrounds in which it is difficult to question the views of respected authorities, they may be reluctant to express any negative evaluation which they consider to be criticism of other researchers. As Cadman (1997) points out, these students often interpret the task of making critical use of published work and source materials as one of criticising published work, a task which they regard with dismay. In addition,

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international students who are working within an unfamiliar research culture can find it daunting to attempt to appeal to the values of their new discourse community.

In an attempt to throw some light on the problems which international NESB postgraduate students may have in adopting a critical voice in their writing, I present a case study of my work with an Indonesian postgraduate student. I examine how she developed a more appropriate critical voice in her writing over several drafts of a detailed review of two individual studies.

## **The Case Study**

### ***The Student***

The student, whom I'll call Dewi, was an Indonesian student who was enrolled in a one year MEngSc in the Faculty of Engineering at Monash University. In Indonesia, she worked as a university lecturer and, while she had published a number of research papers in Indonesian, she had had very little experience in writing academic English. As for all international students enrolled in relatively short courses, there was no time available for her to become familiar with western academic genres and she felt under great pressure to perform at a high level in English almost immediately.

### ***The Task***

As an assessment task in one of her subjects, Dewi had to write a review of two research papers. Her supervisor had discussed with her the format which he expected, namely a short summary followed by a detailed critical review. The student had little difficulty with the summary and she only needed some assistance with the grammar and vocabulary in the drafts of this section of the task. By contrast, she found it much more difficult to write the critical review. The major challenge for her was to understand clearly the conventions of literature reviews in a western academic context and thus to adopt an appropriate voice in her writing. The development of this understanding through our work on drafts of the critical review is discussed below.

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## **Draft 1**

The writing in the first draft of the critical review revealed that Dewi had a general understanding of what she was expected to write. She outlined the key features of the research in each study and then attempted to evaluate the research by examining its strengths and weaknesses.

Dewi's evaluation of both studies seemed to be very positive. The positive evaluation was positioned prominently in the opening and concluding paragraphs, with statements such as "this is interesting paper", the study "has succeeded as a useful guide to tactile sensing for many years", "their method is very simple and understandable" and "this paper is very useful for other research". Here, the positive evaluation is confidently expressed and implicitly appeals to shared values of what constitutes good research in the field.


By contrast, Dewi's evaluation of the limitations of the research presented in both papers was very tentative. In the review of paper 1, she stated that "I think that the writers made a mistake when they chose the selected features...This mistake may be just mistype" and "Their comparison graphs are quite confusing. It would have been better if they had used the same scales...". Her claims here are highly qualified and she is almost apologetic about suggesting that there are any weaknesses in the research. In the review of Paper 2, she simply listed a number of limitations in the final paragraph, stating that

this paper was only based on questionnaires or predictions which were not really accurate ...[The researcher] did not mention how was the question format and how he made the summarizing map from his questionnaire responses.

However, she had not identified or analysed these limitations in the body of the review, nor had she given any supporting evidence for her claims. To be convincing, Dewi needed to substantiate these briefly mentioned limitations. Thus, in her first draft of the review, Dewi had not been able to adopt a confident critical voice.

In our tutorial discussion of this draft, I focussed on Dewi's evaluation of the research presented in the two studies. As we analysed her draft together, she gradually

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identified and explained the limitations she had found, and it became clear that she considered both studies to have serious weaknesses. While being reluctant to “criticise” other researchers, she was able to provide great detail about the errors in the notation and calculations in Paper 1, and to argue forcefully that the methodology of the research presented in Paper 2 was fundamentally flawed. She had carefully evaluated the claims made in these papers, and had read widely in the literature to analyse these claims in the light of other studies in the field. It was clear that she had actually formed an incisive, well-supported critical evaluation of these studies, but that she had not expressed this in her writing.

There were clearly a number of factors at work. Her major problem was **not** that she did not understand what the process of critical evaluation meant; **rather**, she did not know how to write a critical review which she felt would be acceptable in a western academic context. Although she was certain about her judgement of the studies, she was very unsure about what would be considered acceptable evaluation by her readers and what would be considered unacceptable criticism. To avoid making controversial claims, she omitted much of her negative evaluation, qualified most of the negative evaluation which she did include and softened its effect by carefully locating these negative comments between favourable comments. In short, she had not adopted a convincing critical voice.

## **The Development of a Critical Voice**

The first step in the development of an appropriate critical voice was for Dewi to gain a clear understanding of the expectations of a literature review in English. Her very understandable reluctance to risk making inappropriate criticism meant that she needed to be convinced that it was acceptable to express both positive and negative evaluation of the work of other researchers. I explained the differences between critical evaluation and criticism, and we then discussed the generic conventions of literature reviews in Indonesian and in English research writing. Together we analysed the evaluation expressed in a number of literature reviews in English in her field. In addition, I stressed the importance of discussing her review with her supervisor and getting further reassurance from him that the evaluation in her review was justified and appropriate.

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The second step was for Dewi to develop her ability to express the critical evaluation appropriately. She formulated the claims that accurately conveyed her evaluation and we then examined how to express these claims accurately in suitable academic English. We also discussed how to provide the analysis to substantiate her claims.

By the final draft of the review, she had adopted a much more confident voice in her writing. In her review of Paper 1, Dewi clearly identified the “number of inaccuracies in the paper which are quite confusing for the readers”. She discussed each of these inaccuracies in turn, first explaining each inaccuracy and then analysing its repercussions. For example, she stated that

[the] notations for zeroth, first and second order moments are unclear...These confusing notations caused some errors in the authors' explanation of equation 4...Because of these errors equation 4 is ambiguous for the reader.


In these assertions, she has adopted a confident critical stance.

In her review of Paper 2, Dewi provided a detailed evaluation of the researcher's methodology stating that

[before] the validity of Harmon's study can be discussed, the validity of the methodology needs to be questioned. The predictions he made in this paper were only based on questionnaire responses and a literature review. He did not provide an example of the questionnaire nor did he explain how he developed questionnaire results. It is not clear whether he provided a limited range of possible responses to each of the questions he asked.

Here she appealed to values that she felt were shared by her readers. First, valid predictions could only be made from widely accepted knowledge, and second, a rigorous study would have provided a sample questionnaire so that the researcher's claims could have been properly evaluated. Dewi continued to evaluate the researcher's methodology by providing evidence of the serious omissions that the

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researcher had made, summarising by stating that “Without the questionnaire, it is difficult to understand the data in his study and then it is also difficult to see how he made his predictions.” In this review, she has again adopted an appropriate critical voice with confident appeals to commonly accepted standards of rigorous research.

## Conclusion

The international postgraduate student from Indonesia in the case study reported in this paper was able to form an incisive critical evaluation of previous studies in her field but she had difficulty expressing this evaluation confidently and appropriately. While similar difficulties may also be experienced by monolingual English-speaking students in the early stages of their research degrees, this student's problems were clearly compounded by her lack of familiarity with the conventions of critical reviews in a western academic context. A clearer understanding of these conventions enabled her to adopt an effective critical voice in her writing.

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