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## Looking *behind* the Writing

The Design and Implementation of a Framework to Provide Transitional Support for the Development of Written Articulacy at PG Level, a University of Cambridge Case Study

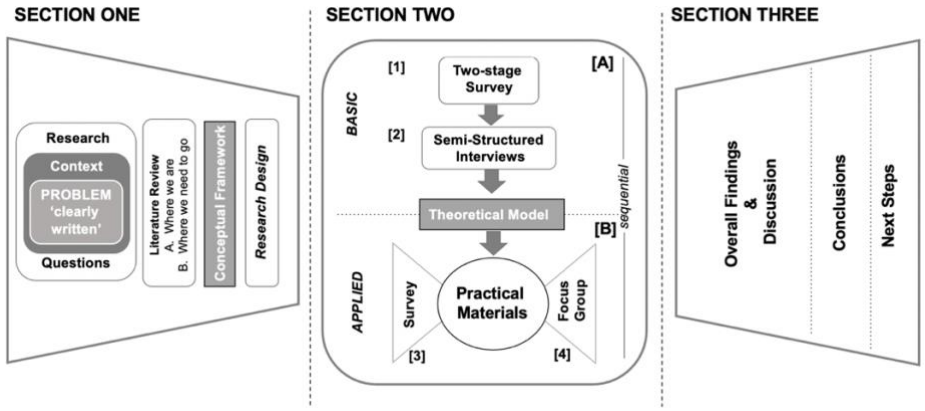
### 1: Research

As the title suggests, the objective of the research is to provide better transitional support for novice postgraduate writers, for both first and second language speakers of English, at the University of Cambridge.

To contextualise my motivation for this study, my primary role as Director of Academic Development & Training for International Students at the University of Cambridge since 2008 is to support students whose first language is not English, principally postgraduates, in developing and honing their discipline-specific academic literacy skills in English, and of this skills set, foremostly writing. To the untrained eye, the main difficulties that international students face are *simply* to do with language. Yet my experience has shown me that whilst these difficulties may seem to manifest themselves as linguistic, the root cause is usually far more a lack of awareness of the expectations of written academic English within their discipline.

In my research-informed practice to date I have sought to uncover the *rhetorical heritage* of English so as to be able to define what 'clearly written', the University's criterion for postgraduate writing, means in order to develop strategies as to how one might support students in achieving this. However, in order to be of greater pedagogical and developmental benefit, I felt I needed to strip this back further still to first explore how knowledge itself is constructed across the academic disciplines before investigating how this is subsequently represented in the written form in English. Since cultures, both national and disciplinary, do not write using the same assumptions, strategies and goals, developing arguments is a culturally embedded topic. It would therefore also be necessary to gain an understanding of how this knowledge construction and representation may be different, not only in different disciplines, but also in different linguistic cultures. So, whilst inspired initially by my work with students whose first language is not English, the changing demographics of higher education, both here and overseas, means that the insights that this study will hopefully afford will be of benefit to both first and second language speakers of English.

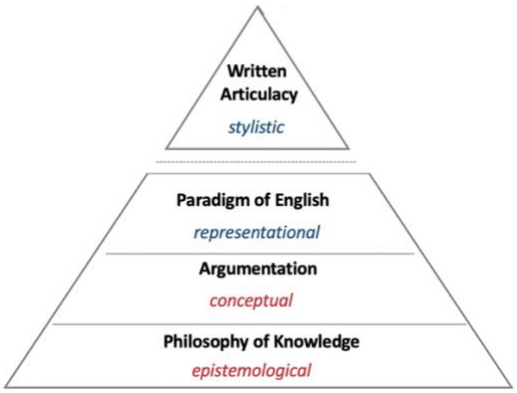
The research is an exploratory, sequential mixed methods study, which can be visualised as follows:




**Section One** seeks to problematize what are often discounted as simply 'language problems' and to postulate what the actual underlying causes are, providing the resultant objectives for this study; which are followed by a **Literature Review**, which is subdivided into (a) what the current practices are before discussing (b) what we need to include in writing support in order

to be more effective, and which closes with my multi-dimensional **Conceptual Framework**; and the section concludes with the overarching **Research Design**.
**Section Two** adopts a quasi-chronological approach and presents, discusses, and analyses the three stages of the research in turn. As the research design is sequential, each stage will include a more narrowly focussed methodology and methods section, before presenting the data gathered, and then discussing the findings of that stage and how these influenced the following stage. These three stages are grouped above into **[A] Basic Research**, which covers the initial **[1] two-stage survey** and the follow-up **[2] semi-structured interviews**, and **[B] Applied Research** which will detail the **[3] practical materials** that were developed in light of the basic research and present the results as to how these were received through a final **[3] survey** and a **[4] focus group.**
**Section Three** discusses the overall findings of the research, before a detailed, evaluative **Discussion** of the outcomes of and **Conclusions** drawn from the research, and it closes with a consideration of what the next steps should be.

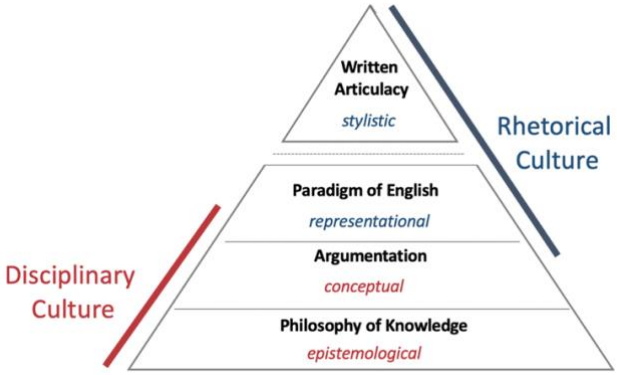
My hypothesis is that the prized feature of *clarity* in writing at postgraduate level is made up of four constituent layers, each building on from the previous and cumulatively leading to *clarity*. These layers are: 1) *epistemological*: philosophy of knowledge; 2) *conceptual*: argumentation; 3) *representational*: paradigm of English; and 4) *stylistic*: written articulacy.




In order to 'create knowledge', one first needs to know what constitutes knowledge in one's particular field and how one goes about creating new knowledge. The epistemological base of the scientific method, for example, is assumed to be more fact-oriented and so there may be less emphasis on the way that the knowledge is conveyed. But as one moves along the academic discipline cline towards the arts and humanities, the expression of knowledge is inextricably linked to its formulation and so the way in which the ideas are expressed is crucial. An understanding of the epistemological base of one's discipline(s) is therefore a necessary precursor to understanding how knowledge is constructed, and by extension, how research is conducted. An explicit awareness of this is becoming ever more imperative given the rise of inter/intra-disciplinary research which criss-crosses these epistemological boundaries. Once created, this new knowledge then needs to be given conceptual form in terms of a structured argument. The dominant paradigm in this regard within UK higher education seems to be that of the 'traditional academic pedagogy of osmosis' (Turner, 2011:37), which rests on the belief that what is discussed in the seminar/supervision and even reading is assumed to change what is in the student's head (Vygotsky, 1968) and that this transformation will then be evident in the student's writing. No connection is made, however, between the dialogical and polylogical forms of discussion and debate in speech and the monological form of writing. An understanding of discipline-specific models of argumentation is therefore key if this new knowledge is to be accessible to the academic community. Once this logical argumentational structure has been designed, it then needs to be representationally clothed in language in order for it to be accessed. And whilst unjustly suffering from a rather bad press, this is the domain of rhetoric, the art of discourse and suasion. For even in science, the practices of which were once viewed as being merely the objective testing and reporting of knowledge, scientists must persuade their audience to accept their findings by sufficiently demonstrating

that their study or experiment was conducted reliably and resulted in sufficient evidence to support their conclusions. Which then leaves us with the stylistic considerations. The secret to style is simply to have something to say and to say it as clearly as you can (Williams, 2014: 1). This is not as straightforward as it seems, and few academic writers truly achieve it – for if they did, we would have countless examples of *good* discipline-specific writing and hence would have already defined a tried and tested strategy for achieving this. Sword's research in 2012 on *Stylish Academic Writing* showed, however, that there is still a significant gap between what academics consider *good* writing and what they actually publish. But should all of the preceding layers of the pyramid be in place, then the product we have as a result should be both lucid and cogent in argument, leaving 'simply' the final linguistic polish so as to achieve a well-written, articulate text.

The *Conceptual Framework* as so far outlined focuses solely on the constituent parts of good writing at postgraduate level in English, as indeed would reasonably be expected since not only is the medium of instruction at Cambridge English, but Cambridge is in an English-speaking country. But 65% of the postgraduates and 50% of the academics at Cambridge are international, with the caveat as to what 'international' refers to. Whilst a better understanding of what 'clearly written' means across the disciplines in English will naturally be beneficial to second-language speakers of English, such a monolingual approach overlooks the fact that different cultures communicate differently. Hence the second objective of this study, namely to broaden these insights out so as to increase the awareness of how the rhetorical paradigms in languages other than English may achieve this differently. And for this I have looked to draw on and expand the notion of contrastive rhetoric by introducing a cultural frame to the *Conceptual Framework*:




The pyramid arrangement is based on Hall's (1972) iceberg analogy of culture. If the culture of a society was the iceberg, Hall reasoned, then there are some aspects visible above the water, but there is a far larger portion hidden beneath the surface. Transposed to postgraduate-level writing, the externalised component of writing is the *product*, the actual printed page, but this is simply, to return to the analogy, the tip of the iceberg. What we cannot see, that which is below the surface, or *behind* the writing, is the complex cognitive process of constructing knowledge within the disciplines. The dotted line between the stylistic and representational layers in the figure above serves a two-fold purpose: firstly, it represents the *product*, the quality of which is dependent on the quality of the *process* which is beneath the dotted line; and secondly, it represents the pinnacle of written articulacy, for if all of the underlying layers have been successfully completed and the articulation of this research is stylistically appropriate, then the criterion of 'clearly written' has been met.

**2. Institutional Description**

The University of Cambridge is a leading research University. As such it is internationally diverse in both its student and academic body. Around 65% of postgraduates at the University and 50% of the academics are international. The research is conducted entirely at the University with academic and postgraduates across the disciplines.

**3. Key Theorists**

Below are the key theorists that have informed this research, and for each a quotation is provided which highlights the main tenets of their work:

a) **Robert B. Kaplan: Contrastive Rhetoric**

A fallacy of some repute and some duration is the one which assumes that because a student can write an adequate essay in his native language, he can necessarily write an adequate essay in a second language. […] Foreign students who have mastered syntactic structures have still demonstrated inability to compose adequate themes, term papers, theses and dissertations. […] The foreign-student paper is out of focus because the foreign student is employing a rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader. (1966:13)

b) **John Hinds: Writer versus Reader responsibility**

I take as a starting point the position that English speakers, by and large, charge the writer, or speaker, with the responsibility to make clear and well-organized statements. If there is a breakdown in communication, for instance, it is because the speaker/writer has not been clear enough, not because the listener/reader has not exerted enough effort in an attempt to understand. (Hinds: 1987, 143).

c) **George Gopen: Reader Expectations**

Science is often hard to read. Most people assume that its difficulties are born out of necessity, out of the extreme complexity of scientific concepts, data and analysis. We argue here that complexity of thought need not lead to impenetrability of expression; we demonstrate a number of rhetorical principles that can produce clarity in communication without oversimplifying scientific issues. The results are substantive, not merely cosmetic: Improving the quality of writing actually improves the quality of thought.

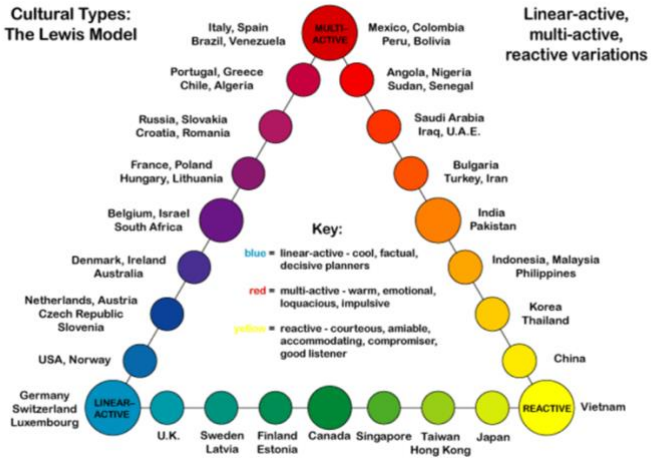
The fundamental purpose of scientific discourse is not the mere presentation of information and thought, but rather its actual communication. It does not matter how pleased an author might be to have converted all the right data into sentences and paragraphs; it matters only whether a large majority of the reading audience accurately perceives what the author had in mind. Therefore, in order to understand how best to improve writing, we would do well to understand better how readers go about reading. Such an understanding has recently become available through work done in the fields of rhetoric, linguistics and cognitive psychology. It has helped to produce a methodology based on the concept of reader expectations. (1990: 550)

d) **Richards Andrews: Argumentation in Higher Education**

What do the argumentative text-types and genres used in the academy have in common? […] they must have a logical or quasi-logical structural momentum: one idea or paragraph must lead to another or have some clearly defined connection to it. the horizontal articulation of the written assignment must be as strong as the vertical programming of the ideas within it. (2009: 67)

e) **Richard Lewis: Cultural Model**

One of the factors leading to poor communications is often overlooked: the nationals of each country use their language and speech in a different way. Language is a tool of communication, delivering a message – but it is much more than that: it has strengths and weaknesses which project national character and even philosophy (1996: 63).

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