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Title of Project

Determinants of Ability to Work With Sources
Among International Graduate Students

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TIRF Research Topic Investigated

Language Planning & Policy
English Medium Instruction

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Bio

Gavin O'Neill is an Assistant Professor at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, Japan. He is pursuing his PhD in Education at Temple University, Japan Campus. In his dissertation, Gavin explores the barriers that professionals and fledgling academics from developing countries face when trying to gain access to and participate in the scholarly communities in their fields of interest.



Final Report**Motivation for the Research**

English and Western conventions of academic writing dominate global scholarly communication. As universities increasingly adopt English-medium instruction (EMI) programs, international graduate students are expected to participate in academic communities that operate largely through English-language research and publication. Although EMI creates opportunities for international collaboration, it can also create barriers for students whose previous educational experiences taught them to write in ways that differ from English-language academic conventions.

One important skill for participation in international academic discourse is the ability to work effectively with academic source material. This includes reading, synthesizing, citing, and engaging with previous research according to disciplinary expectations. Because many students entering EMI graduate programs come from educational systems with different conventions for source use, they may face challenges in synthesizing information, representing evidence accurately, and developing arguments based on scholarly literature.

This study examines the factors that influence international graduate students' ability to work with academic sources and how those abilities develop during graduate study in an English-medium

program. By identifying these factors, the study aims to support more effective instruction and policy decisions in EMI and academic writing education.

Research Questions

The study focuses on several possible influences, including students' previous educational experiences, their English-language proficiency, their disciplinary backgrounds, and their sense of participation in an academic research community. This study addressed three main research questions:

- Do previous instruction, as mediated and moderated by educational experiences, and written English proficiency predict the ability to work with sources effectively?
- Can distinct student profiles be identified in terms of predictors of preparedness for graduate-level source-based writing?
- Does instruction, as mediated by orientation towards professional, academic, and student CoPs, predict development in the Ability to Work with Sources effectively?

Research Methodology

This research used a mixed-methods design combining quantitative statistical modeling with qualitative interviews in order to examine both patterns in student performance and the experiences behind those patterns.

Context and Participants

The participants were graduate students enrolled in an English-medium master's program in policy studies at a national university in Tokyo. The program recruits mid-career public policy professionals from a wide range of countries (48 countries from across Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe), many of which are on the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list. Students come from regions including Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe.

These students represent an important population for studying EMI, as they are expected not only to complete graduate coursework in English but also to participate in international research and policy discussions through academic writing.

Research Design

The study was conducted in three phases.

1. In the first phase, students completed a source-based writing assessment designed to measure their ability to synthesize information from multiple texts in order to construct an argument. Their responses were evaluated according to several criteria related to effective source use, including synthesis of information across sources, accurate representation of evidence, awareness of source reliability, and appropriate citation practices. Students also completed surveys about their educational backgrounds and their sense of participation in different communities of practice, including academic, professional, and student communities.

The quantitative data produced by the first phase of data collection were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). This statistical technique allowed the researcher to examine how various background factors predicted students' ability to work with sources.

2. In the second phase, a group of participants took part in semi-structured interviews during their graduate studies. These interviews explored students' experiences with academic writing, their understanding of research practices, and the types of support they received while learning to engage with academic literature.

3. In the third phase, students completed a second source-based writing assessment and survey near the end of their program. This assessment, coupled with the qualitative data from the interviews, allowed the researcher to examine how students' abilities developed over time and to identify factors associated with improvement.

Summary of Findings

The study identified several important factors that influence graduate students' ability to work effectively with academic sources.

- First, English-language proficiency emerged as a key predictor of source-based writing ability. Students with stronger English proficiency tended to perform better at synthesizing evidence from multiple sources and accurately representing research findings. This result supports previous research suggesting that working with sources requires substantial cognitive resources, particularly when writing in a second language. Therefore, students whose cognitive resources were stretched by the need to write in English may have had fewer available resources to complete the complex synthesis task.
- Second, previous academic experience was also an important predictor of the ability to work with sources. Students who had more experience with source-based writing and/or more instruction in how to do source-based writing predictably performed better in the source-based writing task. The amount of this experience and instruction was in turn predicted strongly by their previous field of study, with those in the social sciences having more experience and receiving more instruction than those in other disciplinary domains. However, the results also suggested that educational context matters. Students who had studied in educational systems that emphasized Western academic writing conventions appeared to benefit more from prior experience with research writing than those whose educational backgrounds emphasized different approaches to academic discourse. In fact, one of the most notable findings of the study was that for students who received their previous education in countries where English, and by extension English educational conventions, played a lesser role, the amount of experience with and education on source-based writing actually had a negative relationship with some of the variables used to define *good* source-based writing in this study.
- Finally, the qualitative findings highlighted the importance of students' sense of participation in an academic community of practice. Students who saw themselves as active participants in a research community or envisioned that community as playing an important role in their futures were more likely to invest effort in developing advanced academic writing skills. In contrast, students who viewed their graduate program primarily as professional training or little more than a sojourn into the academic community sometimes showed less motivation to master the skills associated with research-oriented writing practices.

Together, these findings suggest that the ability to work effectively with academic sources is shaped by a combination of linguistic, educational, and social factors.

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers, educators, and institutions involved in English-medium higher education.

- First, the results suggest that EMI programs should provide explicit instruction in source-based academic writing. Many students enter graduate programs without sufficient experience synthesizing research literature, and targeted instruction can help them develop these skills more effectively.

- Second, the study highlights the need for support systems that help international students understand the expectations of global academic discourse. Such support may include writing courses, mentorship programs, and structured opportunities to engage with academic research practices.
- Third, the results have implications for language education policy, particularly in countries seeking to increase participation in global academic and policy communities. Preparing students for participation in international discourse requires more than general English proficiency: it also requires familiarity with the conventions of research writing and scholarly communication.
- Finally, the findings suggest that helping students develop a sense of belonging within academic communities may be an important factor in supporting their development as academic writers. Programs that encourage students to see themselves as contributors to research and policy discussions may promote deeper engagement with academic literature and more effective participation in global scholarly conversations.

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