

Analysis of MA Students' Writing in English Language Teaching: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Approach

Análisis de la escritura de estudiantes de maestría en la enseñanza del inglés:
un enfoque lingüístico sistémico funcional

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This study explores the ways in which master thesis writers position their research in the field of English language teaching in a context where academic literacies are still a developing field. From a social semiotic perspective, this paper aims to identify the resources writers use to represent their object of study and provide a context and justification for research. The analysis focuses on the ideational and textual metafunctions to account for patterns of meanings in seven introductory chapters of master theses in English teacher education. The results reveal a set of interconnected genres—descriptions of the object of study, definitions, and personal exemplum—that build a shared experience with the reader as well as the persuasive purpose of the text.

Keywords: academic writing, genre, research strategies, systemic functional linguistics, thesis writing

Este estudio explora las formas en que los escritores de maestría posicionan su investigación en el área de la enseñanza del inglés, en un contexto en el que la literacidad académica sigue siendo un campo en desarrollo. Desde una perspectiva semiótica social, este documento tiene como objetivo identificar los recursos que los escritores usan para representar el objeto de estudio y proporcionar un contexto y una justificación para su investigación. El análisis se centra en las metafunciones ideacional y textual para dar cuenta de los patrones de significado en siete capítulos introductorios de tesis de maestría en la enseñanza de lenguas. Los resultados revelan un conjunto de géneros interconectados — descripciones del objeto de estudio, definiciones y ejemplos personales — que conforman una experiencia compartida con el lector, así como el propósito persuasivo del texto.

Palabras clave: escritura académica, escritura de tesis, estrategias en la investigación, género, lingüística sistémico funcional

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Introduction

Writing a master dissertation constitutes a big challenge at the end of any educational program when students engage independently in their first research project. In this stage, students are expected not only to draw from their personal and professional experience to find a topic for research but also, they are expected to “negotiate some of their prior literacy experiences associated with academic and non-academic domains and the academic writing requirements of their current degree program” (Kaufhold, 2017, p. 84). In addition to the academic and institutional requirements, students are expected to know the disciplinary conventions of the genre (Autrey & Carter, 2015). These considerations—the relationship between the institution, the literacy practices, and the disciplinary conventions—define master thesis writing as a critical social space in which students have to develop a purposeful academic text on their way towards becoming part of a professional community.

However, more often than not, students fail to recognize the social nature of master thesis writing—in terms of the organization of knowledge and the organization of intellectual and educational practices within a context (Christie & Maton, 2011). The difficulties to recognize thesis writing as a social practice seem to derive from at least three aspects identified in the context of Latin America, particularly in Mexico. First, there is a generalized view that considers writing as a set of skills students are supposed to come equipped with to deal with the reading and writing tasks at the university. Students who struggle with writing assignments are labeled as having a deficit that needs to be “fixed” (Lea & Street, 1998). It goes without saying that this view disregards the broader social context of writing practices. Focusing only on technicalities makes thesis writers lose sight of the institutional context, the conventions of the written text, and the relationships with their immediate readers. This may create scenarios of inequality and disadvantage when

negotiating legitimate participation in a professional community.

Second, there is a wide variety of theoretical trends, influences, and emerging epistemologies for literacy studies in Latin America that make it difficult to nominalize what writing entails (Ávila-Reyes, 2017). Given a context in which the study of writing is a developing field, the predominance of “heterogeneous” theoretical trends causes contradictory uses of epistemological concepts (Navarro, 2019). As a result, the random use of epistemological trends creates a tension among educators’ differing perspectives of literacy. For example, some educators regard writing as a complex social interaction influenced by cultural, social, political, and economic factors; others still see writing as an orderly skill which is set unvarying and transferable across contexts (De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016).

Finally, it is likely that having differing views on writing has an effect on how writing pedagogy is enacted within the classroom. Preconceived ideas about literacy and the lack of explicit instruction of writing in higher education programs obscures the particularities of the thesis genre and the subtleties of disciplinary discourse for students to write more effectively. I argue that in order to understand master thesis writing as a social practice, it is necessary to address issues of epistemology, identity, and power relations within a broader social context. The purpose of this paper is to address that gap. First, I intend to identify the linguistic resources that novice writers use to open a legitimate space for their research in the area of English language teaching (ELT) from a systemic functional linguistics (SFL) perspective. Second, I aim to explore the semiotic potential for meaning making in a critical social space where English is used as an academic language for disciplinary writing.

Master Thesis Writing as a Social Practice

Writing as a social practice is defined as an interplay of practices, literacy events, and texts. According

to Barton and Hamilton (2010) literacy practices are related to different domains of life, as they are shaped by social institutions and power relations as well as by epistemology (Lea & Street, 1998). The literacy events are situations that reveal particular forms of written language that are used to represent values, attitudes, and feelings in a text. Practices, events, and texts are essential to comprehending writing practices as a holistic social phenomenon for they are built and shaped in a community and in relation to other people that go beyond individual acts. Following, I discuss some social practices that illustrate master thesis writing as a social phenomenon.

The first aspect that defines thesis writing as a social practice is the use of disciplinary knowledge. The fact that writing occurs in socially situated practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) demands particular ways to build knowledge in disciplinary spaces such as ELT. In other words, writers generally write for someone and what they write is shaped by a set of rules and conventions that are taken for granted. In this way, what is possible to say and how it must be said is determined by the discursive conventions of the discipline and its members (Ivanić, 1998). These conventions, represented in oral and written discourse, give an account of the social tensions that the participants face in order to have a sense of habitual permanence in a given community (Fairclough, 1989). However, this “common sense”—the way of acting and thinking of a community in disciplinary spaces—is not evident for thesis writers, which places them at disadvantage.

The second aspect for considering writing as a social practice is related to the interpersonal or power relationships that underlie thesis writing in a second language. Typically, in the context of ELT, undergraduate or masters' students write their theses for a very small audience and under the guidance of a supervisor. However, the practices that occur around the genre development are occluded (Autrey & Carter, 2015; Swales, 1996); and it is difficult to know exactly how

this genre is learned and taught (Paré et al., 2009). However, it is to be expected, as Coffin et al. (2003) point out, that the relationship between the supervisor and supervisees exerts some influence on the way writing takes place in higher education, particularly in a crucial document such as the thesis. It is likely that under these circumstances, readers feel they have the authority, as established members of a community, to serve as gatekeepers (Lillis & Curry, 2010), and to determine what constitutes “appropriate academic writing” according to the conventions of the disciplines or academic communities. It is precisely the unawareness of these academic conventions that puts membership into a professional community at risk.

Finally, the third aspect to consider writing as a social practice involves issues of identity shaping. Those may occur in the process of becoming part of a professional community. In addition to learning to communicate in particular ways, thesis writers also have to learn to “be” particular types of people, and forge an identity as academics, professors, or as researchers (Coffin et al., 2003). Thesis writing, then, is a legitimate form of incursion into a disciplinary community but the path for insertion into that community is not explicit. In sum, master thesis writing as a social practice—as suggested in this paper—involves the understanding of the complex interplay of disciplinary knowledge, interpersonal relationships, and identity shaping. However, its study has received little attention in the context of Latin America, particularly in Mexico.

Academic literacies and SFL offer a framework to address that gap because of their focus on practices in context and texts in context (Coffin & Donohue, 2012). These contrasting perspectives complement each other to explore the social and linguistic practices entailed in the introductory chapter of the master thesis in the area of ELT, which is the objective of this paper. In addition to that, it seeks to explore the semiotic potential for thesis writing development in a context where English is used as an academic language. The following research

questions orientate the objectives of this study: (1) What are the linguistic resources instantiated in the introductory chapter of master theses in the area of ELT? and (2) What practices are common for thesis writers to create a legitimate space for research? The rest of the article presents the theoretical underpinnings of both frameworks and how they support the methodological proposal of this study.

Academic Literacies

As has already been mentioned, the concept of literacy means different things to different people. Lea and Street (1998) have conceptualized a range of theoretical trends in three writing models: the skills model, the socialization model, and the academic literacies model (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Street, 1984). The skills model is related to structural views of language as well as cognitive learning views. In this model, writing is considered as an instrumental ability and as a transposition from oral language to written language. The inability to transfer writing skills from one context to another is considered a deficit as concerns students. The second model is that of academic socialization, where students are exposed to specific genres of the community to which they must integrate. According to Lea and Street (2006), it is through an acculturation process where “students acquire the ways of talking, writing, thinking, and using literacy” from the members of a professional community (p. 369). In this vision, it is assumed that the genres possess certain stability and that students will acquire those genres from simple exposition. Even though this model considers contextual factors for the development of writing, the superficial vision of language as a form of transparent representation “fails to address the depth of language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158).

Finally, the academic literacy model considers literacy as socially constructed under situations of power relations, epistemology, and identity (Lea & Street, 1998). This

implies looking at academic practices in higher education as events shaped by the configuration of the social space in which they occur and by power relations. In this way, each space “is concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context” (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369).

Clearly, there is a critical stance in the academic literacies paradigm; one that focuses on practices to enhance transformation of social inequalities (Coffin & Donohue, 2012). That view is shared with SFL where writing is considered as a social and goal-oriented practice with a specific purpose in a broad social context (Martin, 1997). This text-based perspective aims to “teach the students about whole texts as the main unit of purposeful language use and about varieties of language to use in different contexts” (De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016, p. 24). Emphasis is given to the types of genres involved in the master thesis writing as well as its development for which a theory of language that considers social and contextual factors is necessary.

A Functional Model of Language

SFL offers an explanatory model beyond the descriptive nature of language. This model allows decoding the meaning systems that regulate human behavior (Hasan, 2001; Martin, 2001). In other words, when we use the language, we are able to choose from a variety of linguistic resources that make it possible to explore the relationships among the text, context, register, and genre to reveal the meaning of social practices. This linguistic framework deconstructs these relationships in such a way that it allows to capture semiotic systems that are not perceptible to the naked eye and allows one to critically evaluate the ideologies that emerge in the text.

In order to know more about the social context in which a particular text is used, SFL provides a multilayer description of the clause in light of three metafunctions. The ideational, which represents the experience of the

world (*field*); the interpersonal, which expresses the relationship between the participants in a communicative event and how language organizes social interaction (*tenor*); and the textual, which gives value to the text and its components to achieve a coherent discourse (*mode*). Together, field, tenor and mode represent the register of the text (Martin & Rose, 2007). In this sense, we can say that the metafunctional nature of language allows semiotic activity and the choice of meanings; and the creation of meaning is a semiotic act (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Master thesis writing in ELT is a case in point of a semiotic act. When we write the introductory chapters, these metafunctions are expressed simultaneously in the text and each contains three layers of meaning namely phonology and graphology, lexico-grammar and discourse semantics (Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2007). These layers of meaning—also known as strata—display realizations of language at the level of sounds and letters, at the level of the clause and at the level of the whole text. Phonology and graphology are used to represent an oral or written expression (Martin, 1992). The lexico-grammar layer focuses on the meaning of clauses, while the discursive semantics focuses on the holistic meaning of the text. Essentially, the integration of the discourse semantics and the lexico-grammar strata as an analytical framework offer the means for the study of the generic structure of the introductory chapters of a master thesis.

Summing up, the analytical tools of SFL bring to the surface the subtleties of written language. It also distinguishes the subtleties of the academic language used in the disciplines; most importantly, it shows how these are shaped according to the context in which they occur. As Martin (2008) points out: “A model of this kind provides a social semiotic perspective on knowledge structure; and, knowledge is by and large realized through, construed by, and over time reconstrued through ideational meaning via the modalities of language and image” (p. 34).

A Functional Perspective of a Micro Genre: Thesis Introduction

This study focuses on the micro genre of the introduction which belongs to a larger genre—the whole thesis. Traditionally, Swales' (1990) CARS model (Creating A Research Space) is widely used for article introductions. The model has three moves to perform various rhetorical functions whose purpose is to establish the research topic and justify the need for more research. When writing the introductory chapter of the master thesis, the writer is asked to follow those moves in order to persuade the reader that his or her research is significant, that there is room for new knowledge, and that a contribution can be made to it. Although moves in the writing of research articles are a useful pedagogical tool, it lacks a functional explanation of language which limits the potential to distinguish subtle differences between disciplines, discourses, or genres (Hood, 2010). Swales himself recognizes the need of a model that provides frameworks for the study of social action (Swales, 2009).

A second limitation is that there is no consensus in the interpretation of the moves because there are no explicit lexico-grammar patterns that indicate what move it is. The validation of the arguments in the CARS model is based more on the experience and intuition of the experienced reader rather than on a theory of language. This causes the particularities of the genre to be occluded before the eyes of the inexperienced writer.

From a more functional vision, Hood (2010) proposes a more transparent model, capable of revealing the ways in which knowledge and academic arguments are socially constructed in discourse, through discourse, and through dialogue with other knowledge and other knowers. In other words, a functional model is intended to achieve an understanding of what it means to create meaning in the academic sense and to recognize what literacy practices are privileged in a context in which new knowledge is being built. Those patterns of meaning can be viewed from three perspectives: “The relationships that are enacted by language, the experiences

that are construed by it and the role language plays in the context” (Rose & Martin, 2012, p. 22).

Hood (2010) formulates the notion of *research warrant* as a discursive context where writers not only state their claims but are able to support them before the objectivity and criticism of their readers. The social purpose of the research warrant is to justify the need of the research in a given area of study. In this particular case, identifying the distinctive structure of introductions of master theses allows certain purposes to be achieved such as legitimizing research in the area of ELT.

In this view, chapter one is typically composed of a series of genres, each playing a role in the process of legitimizing a contribution to knowledge by establishing a research warrant (Hood, 2011). The author mentions that writing an introduction involves building an evaluative representation of one or more fields of knowledge, with the purpose of persuading a community of readers of the legitimacy of the research project. This represents a double challenge for novice writers in the area of ELT because, in addition to mastering aspects of genre and register, they have to negotiate knowledge construction in a second language. This becomes relevant since writing constitutes a social field where experience is constructed in a dynamic way that goes from everyday knowledge to the synthetic and elaborated way of written grammar (Halliday, 1993). The following sections describe the methodological design to address these issues.

Method

In order to investigate the complexity of literacy practices from a social perspective this qualitative research follows a textual and ethnographic orientation (De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016). In that regard, SFL and academic literacies explore the social and linguistic practices entailed in the introduction chapter of a master thesis. As an analytical method, SFL would be able to bring to the surface the regulatory principles that underlie the invisible practices of reading and writing in higher education that unconsciously regulate our behavior (Martin,

2001). It is expected that a linguistic analysis of thesis writing shows the social positioning of the speaker, the visible features of the text, and the discourse that links certain texts in different ways (Hasan, 2001). On their part, academic literacies allow the interpretation of those features to identify what practices are more evident in the process of thesis writing. This, in order to find answers to my two research questions (see section Master Thesis Writing as a Social Practice).

Context

This study was carried out in the School of Languages of a public university in Central Mexico. The school offers an MA program in ELT. Master students are generally in-service teachers from different contexts and backgrounds. Towards the end of the program, they have to write their thesis in English as part of the graduation requirements. During the two-year program students write different types of academic papers; however, the program does not offer any explicit instruction nor writing courses in the curricula. As an immersed participant in the field (Edwards, 2002), I am well aware of the practices of the community, their legitimate participants and newcomers, such as the thesis writers. However, awareness about the text is another basic principle for literacy research (Eggs, 1994); one that allows establishing a distance from the research field and separate any interpersonal relationship between the writer and the researcher and maintain confidentiality, ethics, and objectivity (Creswell, 2012).

Corpus Selection

The corpus of this research consists of seven introductory chapters of master theses in the program of ELT, one per year during the period of 2010 to 2016. Its selection considered three main criteria. The first one had to do with the identification of the five most prolific supervisors as thesis directors in five cohorts of the program. The purpose was not only to identify consistency in the patterns of the thesis genre, but also

to analyze the writing conventions of this community by analyzing its members' supervision practices. The second was related to the institutional validation of the thesis and the degree completion process. In other words, those theses had been legitimized and validated through an oral and written examination process. The intention was not to judge whether a thesis was "good" or "bad." Rather, the objective was to identify the writing conventions widely accepted by the community. Finally, the last criteria focused on the whole text and its subtle variations in response to social contexts in terms of function and meaning (Eggins, 1994).

Quantitatively, the corpus represented 9% of the total sample, which may not be statistically representative. However, from a qualitative standpoint, a small corpus gives meaning to the analysis and it is relevant as the analysis focuses on the instance and not on the language system, as referred to in the following quote: "Instantiation involves the way we observe metastability in social semiotic systems" (Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 310). In other words, there is an inertia between instantiation and the semiotic system. Table 1 shows the title of the theses of the corpus, the graduation year, and the code assigned to each introductory chapter.

Table 1. Titles of Master Theses in the Period 2010–2016 Which Constitutes the Analyzed Corpus

Number	Year	Title
1	Intro_2010	<i>Teachers reflections on teaching English to children through content-based instruction</i>
2	Intro_2011	<i>Supervision in higher education research contexts: Understanding expert research supervision</i>
3	Intro_2012	<i>Exploring the effects of an ELT MA program on teachers' professional development</i>
4	Intro_2013	<i>Promoting project-based learning in higher education learners to enhance their performance in learning a foreign language</i>
5	Intro_2014	<i>Experiential grammatical metaphor in English and Spanish linguistic research articles: A comparative study</i>
6	Intro_2015	<i>English teachers' journals: From description to reflection and development in Mexican public basic education</i>
7	Intro_2016	<i>Dyslexia and children's English language learning in a Mexican elementary school: A crowdsourced intervention study</i>

Data Analysis

After corpus selection, the sample chapters were transcribed for analysis. In order to find the recurrent linguistic patterns in the texts, I used codes to differentiate between simple and complex clauses following the procedure suggested by Butt et al. (2003). After the texts were annotated, all verbal groups were underlined to identify the number of clauses. In total, the texts yielded 491 clauses and 94 clause complexes, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Clause Analysis by Introductory Chapter

Chapter 1	No. of clauses	No. of clause complexes
Sample 2010	63	10
Sample 2011	80	14
Sample 2012	46	12
Sample 2013	97	15
Sample 2014	51	10
Sample 2015	76	17
Sample 2016	78	16
Total	491	94

This analysis generated a characterization of the structural elements of the master thesis genre at a lexico-grammar level. It was possible to identify the subtleties of discourse through a search for linguistic evidence that supports the tenor that the text establishes with its readers, its function, and the language in use to fulfill certain social purposes (Egins, 1994). Establishing the text as the focus of analysis allowed lexical-grammatical patterns to reflect by themselves different constructions of novice writers. In order to grasp those constructions, it was necessary to extend focus to the discourse semantic strata (Martin & Rose, 2007), and look for the patterns of meaning that unfold in the text to establish halfway points between grammar and genre (Hood, 2011). Those results are described in the following section.

Results

This section reports the findings that shed light on the social practices around master thesis writing in the area of ELT. By explaining how this genre is linguistically constituted and what its social function is, I attempt to respond to the research questions of the study. First, the orientation to the topic section addresses the linguistic resources and the patterns of meaning used in the introductory chapters of master theses. Second, the writer's experiences and the portrayal of identity represent two common social practices—or rhetorical strategies—that justify research in the area of ELT, create empathy with the reader, and legitimize research.

Orientation of the Topic in the Master Thesis Introduction

Thesis writing at a master level requires students to draw from their literacy experiences, both academic and non-academic to engage in a research topic (Kaufhold, 2017). One of the findings reflects a flow of events built throughout the text that helped to characterize the introduction genre as a whole (Martin & Rose, 2007). In the corpus analyzed, there was evidence of some genres used within the introduction to open a space for

research. The object of study—or its definition—, the description of the local context, and the report of studies are recurrent practices that orientate the research topic of the writers. Those events do not occur in a particular order along the introduction, but they are present in the chapters analyzed.

The following example illustrates how the writer constructs the object of study by means of patterns of lexical choice (Martin & Rose, 2007). It also provides a description of the local context in relation to the object of study and supports it with a report of studies. In the first paragraph of Intro_2010, the representation of the field centers on the teaching and learning process of English as a second language. The field is construed using the word chain: *content-based instruction, language learning, second language acquisition, and educational and cognitive psychology*.

Intro_2010

As Grabe and Stoller (1997) report, *Content Based Instruction (CBI)* contributes enormously to successful *language learning*. They present research evidence that range from studies in *second language acquisition*, controlled training studies to research in *educational and cognitive psychology* (p. 5) . . .

Thus, the purpose of this study is to present my own research in this area as well as the framework used to carry it on. The current research presents a case study which addresses the issue of Content Based Instruction (CBI) . . .

A number of significant studies have been done based on CBI. Early versions of CBI were used in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) . . .

There are a considerable number of studies that have focused their attention on the implementation of the approach (CBI) rationale, curriculum design, materials, learning outcomes, etc.) (See Met, 1999, Brooks & Sandkamp, 2000, Richards & Rodgers, 2001, Brown, 2005).

However, to my knowledge, CBI teachers' impressions have not yet been deeply explored.

This lexical pattern represents only a first orientation to the research topic from an ideational perspective. In other words, readers can get an overview of what the research topic is about. From a textual perspective, the themes used in the introduction display how other meanings are construed throughout the text (Hood, 2011). As we can see in Intro_2010, the theme “Grabe and Stoller (1997)” assists the writer in introducing the topic of the thesis: the use of content-based instruction in the teaching and learning process of English as a second language. Alignment with these authors aids in qualifying their research as important. After alignment, the writer shifts themes in order to introduce her own research. The theme “thus, the purpose of this study” sets the basis for a case study in a very local context. Finally, the themes “a number of significant studies” and “there are a considerable number of studies” introduce a list of reports that support the writer’s own study. These thematic changes contributed to building a shared experience with the reader and the persuasive purpose of the text. The theme “However, to my knowledge,” indicates that further research is necessary.

The second example, Intro_2014, follows a similar pattern as the previous one. The field is construed using the following word chain: *academic writing, skill, high literacy, academic and professional disciplines, rhetorical moves, schematic structure*. This lexical pattern identifies “academic writing” as the object of study. The expressions “Although these studies have been very significant” and “This study” emphasize not only the importance of current studies, but also a possible contribution to knowledge from the writer’s research.

Intro_2014

Academic writing is seen as a *skill* and as a crucial concept in the *high literacy*. Students and scholars are expected to show expertise and mastery in their *writing tasks* as they get immersed in their *academic and professional disciplines*.

The characterization of academic writing in research articles has placed special interest on *rhetorical moves* and *schematic structure* like that by Swales (1990) for instance.

Although these studies have been very significant, it is also crucial to concentrate not just on the rhetorical perspective, but also on the lexical and grammar angle in research articles. Halliday (1994), in relation to this, considers grammar as a key element in discourse analysis . . .

This study was done since academic writing plays a crucial role in research articles publishing. **Researchers need to cope with academic writing skills**, and I believe that the exploration of Grammatical Metaphor is a way of succeeding in writing.

From the examples above, we can see that the orientation to the object of study plays an important role to establish the importance of the research in the introduction. This finding is consistent in four out of the seven theses analyzed. Thesis writers in the area of ELT make use of definitions and reports of studies to create a need for research in their local contexts.

The Experience as a Rhetorical Strategy to Justify Research

The analysis of the introductions brought to light another practice used to create a “research warrant” (Hood, 2010). That is the inclusion of the writer’s voice from within the field of study. In other words, master thesis writers legitimize their research based on the experiences they have in their local settings. By means of the anecdote or the exemplum, thesis writers create empathy with the readers. In addition to that, the experiences they display in the text highlight the struggles they undergo in the process of writing a thesis as we will see farther on.

Intro_2012 provides a representation of the field which focuses on teachers’ professional development. The word chain: *teachers’ professional development, reflective teaching, language diaries and collaborative practice*

contextualize the topic. That lexical chain specifies an orientation to the study by presenting a list of studies related to the writer's object of study, followed by an indication of the lack of research in his local context.

Intro_2012

Teachers' professional development has been studied from different perspectives, including *reflective teaching* (Bartlett, 1990; Richards & Lockhard, 1996; Wallace, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1996), teachers' use of *language diaries* (Bailey, 1990; Jarvis, 1996), and teachers' *collaborative practice* (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 1998; Edge, 1992; Johnston, 2009) . . .

However, there are very few studies focusing on teachers' development during and after an MA level. For instance, Maaranen & Krokfors's (2007) study investigated reflective processes in primary school teacher education when conducting research for a master's thesis.

I got interested in this topic because what I learned in the master's program has helped me to develop professionally in my teaching context, especially when I teach research classes.

Thus, I wanted to investigate how other English teachers have developed personally and professionally during and after their MA programs and how they perceived this development has changed and shaped their teaching in their working contexts.

However, in Intro_2012, the writer opened a space for his research differently. In this example the writer made use of a personal exemplum as a rhetorical strategy to build empathy with the reader. In the third paragraph, the writer introduces a personal experience to justify the relevance of the investigation. In this case, the thesis writer expressed that the master's degree program had an impact on his professional development as a teacher. For that reason, he explicitly mentioned that he wanted to investigate this topic to see if other teachers shared his experience. The themes in the sample above introduced the topic of the thesis "teachers' professional development," but the shift in themes did not address

the object of study. Instead, it addressed the writer himself in the use of "I."

The use of the personal exemplum was evident in six out of seven samples analyzed where the use of "I" indicates an account of the experience of the writer. In Intro_2011, the writer indicates "Academic writing, research and supervision" as the objects of study. She also makes reference to "a number of studies" to validate the importance of supervision. However, in the introduction there is not any report of such studies. Instead, the writer linked the notion of supervision with her personal experience.

Intro_2011

Academic writing, research and thesis supervision are related terms that play a crucial role in all levels of tertiary education.

Supporting this idea, a number of studies have identified the importance of supervision in the overall success [of a] student (Phillips & Pugh, 2000).

The overall purpose of this study, thus, is to attempt to understand the processes of thesis supervisors when engaged in thesis supervision. The particular focus is to try to understand the processes of 'expert' thesis supervisors to understand what they do . . .

I am particularly interested in this thesis supervision topic because before getting involved in it I [underwent] a difficult situation when trying to get a dissertation supervisor for my graduate thesis project. I was looking for a supervisor when I got an offer from one of them. This person agreed to help me with my project as the thesis supervisor but later rejected me and my project and I found myself without a supervisor.

This led me to think further about the processes of supervising. Was this treatment customary? . . . So, I thought that it might be an important study.

In the fourth paragraph, the use of "I" introduces a critical incident she had while finding a thesis supervisor. After telling her story, she packs her experience in the theme "This," indicating that her experience led to thesis supervision as a research topic.

The Writer's Identity

This section describes how the writer's identity reflected in the texts helps thesis writers to build the field of experience. From a social perspective it sheds light on how thesis writers position themselves as members of the community where they carry out research. Based on the results of the previous analyses that build a representation of the writing in the teaching of languages, this section focuses on the writer from a discourse-semantic perspective since "the clause construes an activity involving people and things" (Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 74). In order to have a broader view of all the aspects involved in writing as a social practice, I also focused on the writer's identity that is portrayed in the text.

In the next paragraph, in Intro_2016, the writer identified herself as an English in-service teacher, as a mother of a child with dyslexia, and as a person with dyslexia herself. The processes underlined in the sample text represent her experience in the words being and feeling. From this position, she is aware of the problems encountered in the educational system for language teaching, and of a reality that limits access to knowledge of English to students in conditions of dyslexia. Addressing this problem in her research project highlights the fact that the subject is very close to her experience. In her introduction, she encourages reflection of the English teaching practice, and urges the establishment of a course of action both at the personal practice and professional levels. By describing herself and sharing her experience she engages with her readers and with other English language teachers that might have a similar experience.

Intro_2016

I have been an English teacher for over 30 years. I have seen the lack of resources and strategies in regard to dyslexia as well as little understanding from my colleagues, parents and students themselves. Being dyslexic myself and having a son with dyslexia led me to consider this topic as my research and find out some of the current trend in education and language . . .

In the last example, Intro_2013, the writer identified himself as an English teacher in middle-school education who, despite his experience and efforts in the classroom, found a problem related to the teaching-learning process. He finds that his teenager students do not engage either with the material or his classes. The student's response to what he considers a "traditional pedagogical practice" motivates him to carry out their research using an alternative methodology.

Intro_2013

For more than eight years, I have been a teacher who has based my teaching in tasks performed in the classroom or were prepared in advanced by students. I have also been the teacher who explained the topic to students and helped them to answer the exercises and activities in the book and workbook. . . . However, I saw my classes were not encouraging the students to learn a foreign language. Additionally, the use of a textbook in every class was boring for the students and we both did not see the results that we expected.

What these examples illustrate, in addition to revealing the identity of the writers and their personal experience, is the problem facing the teaching of English in various educational contexts. This problematic instigates an interest in teachers to solve them through research. It is due to their experience in the field of research that they gain a legitimate space to create a space for their research.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to characterize master thesis writing as a critical and social space in which students commonly struggle to become members of a professional community (Lea & Street, 1998). While in the process of writing the thesis, issues of identity, epistemology, and power relations are imminent. However, it becomes difficult to recognize them as inherent to the writing process. This paper sheds light on some of the writing conventions in the area of ELT.

Findings suggest that thesis writers rely on their experience as a rhetorical strategy to build empathy with the reader by means of anecdotes or personal stories. This means that they include story genres to represent their experiential knowledge, gaining legitimacy “from being an insider” in the field of research (Hood, 2012). From an epistemological standpoint, it is the writer’s knowledge which is valued when it comes to thesis writing and research. However, there seems to be some constraints to develop other epistemologies from the ELT field such as genres, registers, and types of texts that move beyond writing as a technical skill or language as a set of structural issues. The dominant pattern found in theses’ introductions corresponds to genres in which writers introduce, only superficially, the object of study supported by rough descriptions of studies—mostly lists of key studies—as well as bare definitions. Although it is recognized that the experience is relevant in a field such as teaching, it is also crucial to explore other forms to create meaning and move towards “a more detailed account of research design” (Hood, 2012, p. 57).

From a discourse semantics perspective, the combination of the three metafunctions for analyzing the representation of the experience portrays the identity of the thesis writers. Once again, writers rely on their experience to identify themselves as members of a community in the field of ELT. Being aware of the problems encountered in the educational system in general, and in ELT in particular, gives them a sense of belongingness which allows them to negotiate the validity of their research. However, this is not enough to meet the academic, social and institutional conventions of thesis writing (Lea & Street, 1998). Even though the thesis writing process occurs within a social context, the patterns identified in the introductory chapters tend to still reproduce fixed categories such as the ones found in the traditional model of the thesis (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007).

This study of master thesis writing brought to the surface the regulatory principles that underlie writing

in higher education in a context where English is used as a second language. This implies looking at academic practices in higher education as events shaped by the configuration of the social space in which they occur and by power relations.

The interrelationship of the forms of written discourse in the area of ELT as well as the interpersonal strategies to position research in this field allows an understanding of the resources thesis writers employ to write academically. Making explicit the aspects that constitute writing as a social practice opens the possibility for thesis writers to explore other ways to build knowledge and legitimate research to become members of a disciplinary community.

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