

(Non)-Conformity to Native English Norms in Postgraduate Students' Writing in UK Universities: Perspectives of Native and Non-Native Students and Academic Staff

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Abstract: Postgraduate writing is a major academic feature through which students' learning progress is assessed. It is thus of paramount importance that students must meet the academic writing demands required by their respective academic schools and departments in order to pass their chosen courses. The study strives to explore the extent to which native and non-native English-speaking postgraduate students are required to conform to the norm of native-speakerism preferable to native English faculty members in some United Kingdom (UK) universities. This study is mainly qualitative and it involves three research instruments: (a) open-ended surveys targeting 111 native and non-native postgraduate students and 65 lecturers from different departments, (b) semi-structured interviews conducted with 13 lecturers and 10 students, and (c) an analysis of lecturers' feedback on 53 students' written productions. The findings show that the recommendations to conform to native English conventions exist only in some theoretical research. In practice, however, UK universities and academic staff do not save efforts to enable their students to express their ideas in clear comprehensible academic English. These results yield some insightful penetrations not only to the host universities but also to overseas governments as well. In addition, this study offers some implications for postgraduate students.

Keywords: academic staff, academic writing, native English norms, postgraduate students, UK universities

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English has become the first language for higher education worldwide. According to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in the United Kingdom (UK), more than 562990 international students were admitted to undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs in 2020-2021 (HESA 2021). Hyland (2013: 54) states that this vast and diverse student population 'means that learners bring different identities, understandings and habits of meaning-making to their learning'. Despite the fact that many international students achieve the minimum required score in the standardized English tests that are required for admission to universities, higher education literature clearly shows that non-native English speaking students often face English language challenges while pursuing their academic studies (Alfahaid 2017; Thorpe, Snell, Davey-Evans and Talman 2017; Trenkic and Warmington 2017; Wu and Hammond 2011). For example, Macleod, Barnes and Huttly (2018)

conclude in recent research that involved 382 academic staff in 60 UK universities, that the major challenge students often encounter during their postgraduate studies is their lack of mastery of academic writing. They also argue that several students complete their undergraduate degrees successfully albeit with poor academic writing skills. One basic assumption underlying the current study is that the challenge of academic writing becomes more complex when, as Jenkins (2014: 11) puts it, non-native English students are “required to replicate the *national* academic English norms preferred by native English speaker staff and students”. Although this may seem indirectly discriminating against non native students (Wingate 2017), it remains unclear as to what extent this exists when assessing students’ written works at UK universities. This, of course, does not mean that native English-speaking students do not face difficulties when writing for postgraduate studies because they are not an identical “group which shares the same competence in specialist literacy skills demanded by academic writing” (Hyland, 2015: 58). The question is to what extent native English is required in academic writing at UK universities. Native English here refers to “the language of those born and raised in one of the countries (mainly UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) where English is historically the first language to be spoken” (Jenkins 2015: 10). Given that students' perspectives about their experience in writing remain fundamental to an understanding of this issue (Tuck 2018), this study will investigate this issue to gain deep insights into the practises that characterize postgraduate students’ academic writing in some UK universities. More importantly, the emphasis will not only be laid on postgraduate students’ experience in producing academic writing but also on the role and experience of their lecturers as they read and assess their writing assignments and dissertations.

2. Literature review

For the purpose of this study, student academic writing can be defined as “a practice of representing, constructing and communicating knowledge” (Green 2016: 99). The interest in this kind of study emanated from the scant attention paid to English native-like academic writing among researchers. It should be clear from the outset that “academic writing requirements vary according to the discipline, department and even from one lecturer to another” (Tuck 2018: 7). Some non-native postgraduate students usually encounter enormous hurdles in manipulating correct writing, let alone, abiding by English native-like writing conventions. Due to the falling language standards, many foreign students are not allowed to access some British or American universities unless they provide English international certificates attesting that they possess adequate English knowledge in the four language skills. Still, the test holders are said to experience enormous difficulties in writing. Some scholars render the problem of writing to the complexity of the skill (Morton, Storch and Thompson 2015; Zhu 2004). Hence, Anderson and Cuesta-Medina (2019) held that the problem of writing is due to the lack of training in rhetorical aspects of academic writing. More drastically, many researchers point that the students encountered not only problems, but also experienced deep angers in academic writing (Anderson and Cuesta-Medina 2019; Holmes 2022; Holmes

Waterbury, Baltrinic and Davis 2018; Tribble 2019; Tuck 2018). Even native students experience challenges in academic writing because it is a complex task that requires, according to Ferguson (2007: 28), “prolonged formal education, socialisation into academic literacy practices and a gradual accretion of competence in specialised disciplinary discourses”. Marta and Ursa’s (2015) study underscores the importance of reading and writing skills for successful academic writing not only for non-native speakers of English, but also for native speakers as well. If academic English is found to be difficult to students, what about requiring them to conform to native-speakerism? Recognizing that the “term Native Speaker is problematic, in the context of written academic communication” (Tribble 2019: 58), and it is difficult it is to agree on a satisfactory definition (Alfehaid 2019; Seidlhofer 2013), for the purpose of the current study, “Native speakers (students) are understood as those who grow up speaking English as the first and primary language, and Non-native speakers (students) as those who acquire English as an additional language after the establishment of the first language” (Zhao 2017:48). According to Henderson (2009), native speakers are characterized by their relative conformity to the native language writing, fluency, patterns, and proximity to the norm. The native English norm can be defined as the “level of language competency and linguistic structures which could be described as of a native or near-native level” (Vollmer and Thanyawatpokin 2019: 84). In general, non-native speakers are constrained by their nonconformity to native speaking, writing, patterns, and established norms that represent a great impediment to their academic performance. Holliday (2006) claims that native-speakerism has negative impacts on people's life and plays a ‘divisive force’ leading to ‘political inequalities within ELT’. Yet, Romer (2009: 99) argues that “The native academic writer does not seem to exist” and native phraseology/patterning is not an issue as expertise becomes more crucial than nativeness. A similar conclusion was drawn by Wang’s (2013) study on university Chinese English speakers’ perceptions showing their preference for non-conformity to English native language and shifting ‘from monolithic English to pluralistic Englishes, or from exonormative to endonormative orientations. Following up-to-date research works, Hyland (2018) emphasizes the importance of academic English but criticizes the expansion of English at the expense of original languages imposing an ‘imprisoning conformity’ on native norms on nonnative writers.

In a comprehensive study, Gonzalez (2016) uncovers that numerous studies have campaigned against the myth of the native speaker fallacy since the emergence of Paikeday’s (1985) seminal work entitled, “The Native Speaker is Dead”, because this ideology endorses an idealized native speaker and establishes social sanctions against non-native speakers. On his part, Schmitz (2016) maintains that the concept ‘native speaker’ is racist and exclusive as it confers privilege and power to nativity. Concomitantly, Viafara (2016) calls for combatting this myth because it entails ‘pervasive and harmful’ ideologies. The alleged superiority of native speaker norms over non-native speaker norms has come under severe criticisms due to the rise of paradigms such as English as a global language, English as an international language, English as a lingua franca, world Englishes and intercultural

communicative competence (Houghton, Rivers and Hashimoto 2018; Khatib and Rahimi 2015). Bohn and Hansen (2020) summarize the objections against the native speaker norm: native speaker proficiency is very difficult to be acquired by most non-native students language, native-speaker proficiency is not the right kind of competence and non-native students have the right to use English in their own way English does not belong to native speakers.

In spite of the unfathomable schism between academic English and native like English, some researchers believe that the two terms are confused in many places. For instance, Kuteeva (2014) shows that “academic literacy in English is often mistaken for a need to achieve a native-like proficiency”. This accords with the finding of Aneja (2016) that “Despite its imprecision, the native–non-native dichotomy has become the dominant paradigm for examining language teacher identity development”. To have a practical proof on the extent of conformity or non-conformity to nativeness, we make recourse to lecturers’ feedback on students’ written productions. Indeed, lecturers’ feedback plays a great role in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of students and enhancing their progress in writing (Al-Bashir and Rahman 2016; McFadzien 2015).

Research to date has contributed much to our understanding of the status of native English in social life and professional careers via English-published works (Harsanti and Manara 2021; Holliday 2018; Houghton, Rivers and Hashimoto 2018; Romer 2009; Tribble 2019). Nevertheless, relatively little research work has investigated the issue of native English in students’ written works. Advocates of this approach believe that students must conform to the conventions of English native language and any divergence from this variety is considered as a deviant from the English norm. Justifying this stance, Trudgill (2002: 151) states that “the true repository of the English language is its native speakers”. Arguably enough, Prodromou (2007) underlines that non-conformity to English native language was often criticized and even penalized. Jenkins (2011) argues that English language teaching policy required the use of native academic English throughout the world. More emphatically, Jenkins (2014: 12) posits that academic staff in the UK and other English-speaking countries “tend to take it as given that appropriate academic English means standard native academic English”. She also adds that “several students talked, mostly with displeasure, of their tutors and supervisors changing their writing style to make it more like their own or more ‘British’” (Jenkins 2014: 185). Correspondingly, Widdowson (2013) adopts a conventional stance of language pedagogy whose objective is to develop a hard-conformist mode of learning. He claims that any non-conformity aspects are regarded as unacceptable forms of language. Exploring conformity to nativeness, Zhao (2017) confutes the idea of native speakers’ advantage in writing and contends that academic language must be learned by novice native or non-native speakers. Likewise, Shin (2019) examined corpora on the use of lexical bundles and uncovered that students exhibit formulaic language in their academic writing. Unflinching, Fang (2018) argues for moving beyond the idealized native speaker model to challenge the ideology of native-speakerism in various contexts of English language teaching. In this respect, Jenkins (2006: 175) asserts that there is a “need to abandon the native speaker as

the yardstick and to establish empirically some other means of defining an *expert* (and *less expert*) speaker of English, regardless of whether they happen to be a native or nonnative speaker”. She raises a number of questions that remain to be investigated in further research including the relevance of native speaker norms for international intelligibility and what kinds of written norms that do not conform to those of native speakers. The point is that there is a clear debate about what kinds of English language and writing policies should be informing current complex higher education in English-speaking countries. This study strives to expand the current discussion on these issues and make a modest contribution to this field. Thus, to explore the extent of conformity to native English that may be required by academic staff and various UK universities, we make recourse not only to the surveys and interviews but also to lecturers' feedback on concrete students' productions. The study will provide some implications for current policies and practices, and what is required in order for UK universities and similar ones to abandon their attachment to native English.

3. Method

The study attempts to investigate whether postgraduate students are required to produce native-like English by their academic staff and departments in UK universities through eliciting the perspectives of students as writers and lecturers as assessors. Tuck (2018: 183) asserts that such research studies are needed because “student writing, written assessment, marking and feedback continue to be sources of concern and dissatisfaction amongst staff and students alike while occupying a large proportion of academic teachers’ time and energy”. The main focus of the study is to answer the following overall research question:

To what extent is native academic English required in the academic writing of postgraduate students in UK universities? Insights from Genre Analysis (Swales 1990) and System Functional Linguistics (Martin 1992) have offered the theoretical framework to answer this research question mentioned above.

Research design

This study adopts an interpretive pattern as the topic was not only complex but also prone to different interpretations. A qualitative approach was used in this exploration due to its appropriateness for accessing an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000; Stake 1995), mainly postgraduate academic writing in a UK context. Similarly, Neuman (2014) sees that the qualitative approach enables researchers to comprehend how participants create meaning in their everyday lives. The insightful strength of qualitative research that will follow the interpretive paradigm will help to understand the phenomenon in natural settings from the perspectives of those involved in the process (Creswell 2012).

Instruments

Three instruments were used to diagnose the native and non-native students' experiences as writers and lecturers as assessors of their academic writing in terms

of nativeness: (1) lecturers' and students' open survey; (2) lecturers' and students' interview; and (3) lecturers' feedback on students' written productions. The lecturers' open-ended survey consists of open-ended questions that do not impose any constraints on the informants while answering. It aims to explore their experiences in assessing postgraduate students' assignments and dissertations and to examine the extent to which native-like academic English is required in students' written works.

The instruments were analysed via content analysis which according to Neuman (2014) allows researchers to investigate and discover features of large amounts of data that might otherwise go unnoticed. The method involved classifying the data into themes following frequency analysis. To gauge the internal consistency of the survey and the interview in this study, we made use of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The reliability indices for the questionnaire were .67 and for the semi-structured interviews were .65. For the validation of the two research instruments, we made recourse to content validity and construct validity. The two research instruments were submitted to four professors in Applied Linguistics to consult their clarity and appropriateness. Some comments were obtained and considered. Also, factor analysis was used to check the construct validity in statistical measures.

Participants

The lecturers' open-ended survey was addressed to 65 participants: 60% females and 40% males. Most of the respondents were British representing 75% and the other 25% were from Italy, USA, and Canada. The fields of study of these lecturers comprise various disciplines such as Applied Linguistics, Economics, Business, Engineering, Translation, Psychology... etc. The students' open-ended survey was administered to 111 postgraduate students: 56% females and 44% males from various nationalities. Specifically, 27% of students were native English speakers whereas the majority 73% were non-native speakers. In their master's programs, the postgraduates were following various disciplines in many UK universities. The semi-structured interviews explored the perceptions of lecturers and students about the requirement of adherence to native English in academic writing. All in all, 28% of lecturers accepted the participation in the interviews while 72% of lecturers showed their reluctance due to various personal reasons. Additionally, 24% of students expressed their desire to participate in the interview while 76% of students avowed their reluctance to take part in this process. Finally, the analysis of lecturers' feedback on 53 samples of students' written works aimed to check any potential requirement for English nativeness.

4. Findings

Lecturers' perspectives

The survey asked whether lecturers or departments require students to write assignments or dissertations in academic English that should be native-like and whether native and non-native English students can meet this requirement. The

analysis of the lecturers' open survey revealed that the respondents are divided on this issue. First, the four lecturers who thought that the term 'native-like English' is an equivocal contested issue provided some arguments. For instance, SL65 notes, that "the issue of 'native' competence is a contested issue." Similarly, SL107 argued, "the question is too complicated." Correspondingly, SL13 wondered "what does 'native-like' mean? The concept needs to be defined." Equally, SL50 underlined "Not sure what this means." Second, the 15 lecturers who indicated that postgraduate students are required to write their assignments and dissertations in academic English that should be native-like defended their standpoints. For instance, SL35 replies, "yes, we do require native-like academic English for this." Similarly, SL32 plainly states, "yes, this is expected ... and I expect this from my students." Equally, SL15 emphasizes, "there is no lenience afforded to non-native speakers." Also, SL88 assured, "if students don't meet these requirements, they can't pass the modules." Indeed, non-native or native speakers may encounter similar problems in dealing with native English proficiency. SL30 puts it, "it is obvious that this will be harder for non-native speakers." In the same token, SL56 remarks, "yes, we do require native-like English for students to meet this requirement". Thirdly, the great majority (71%) firmly rebuff the claim that postgraduate students are required to write their works in 'native-like English' but insist that their writing should conform to correct academic English and write down their ideas in clear comprehensive language. SL32 confirms, "it is not a matter of being natively like - it is a matter of producing writing that is appropriate for the context: e.g., genre, register, lexical choices, and formatting." In the same perspective, SL72 specifies, "we never refer to native or non-native; all students are required to use correct English." The general picture that emerges from this survey is that native English simply means academic English for most lecturers. As SL49 mentions, "yes, they do expect academic English." Unequivocally, SL33 emphasizes, "we do expect students from all destinations to present their work in good academic English." SL93 points out "native-like' is not the issue as NS sometimes cannot write clearly." This idea is corroborated by SL95, "many native speakers struggle to write in an appropriate academic style as it is something with which they are not that familiar." In line with this, SL80 adds, "non-native English students find difficulties to meet this requirement because of the lack of practice and because of different backgrounds". Yet, some students mistakenly believe that the complexity of style is a sign of good writing. To rebut this belief, SL85 plainly posits "there is no strict requirement that students will need to write in a complex and sophisticated academic style". Consistently, SL08 illumines, "there is enough training to explain to students that their writing should be simple. However, non-native speakers think that their writing should be much more complicated and use sophisticated words that is unnecessary".

Concerning feedback on students' productions, all the lecturers unanimously attest that they give the same feedback to native and non-native English students alike. SL54 states "I give the same feedback to all students". Also, SL25 asserts "we give the same feedback to both native and non-native students". Above all else, lecturers customarily follow a set of rubrics such as content, organization, morpho-

syntax, diction, and mechanics of writing. Primarily, the most common aspect reiterated by lecturers is content. SL35 illustrates that “the focus of our feedback is on the content of the work”. Further, SL22 overtly expressed that “I focus on content, line of argument, knowledge and understanding”. Next, organization is considered a key factor in academic writing. Without having clear ideas in mind, students will never be able to write anything. SL04 for instance checked “whether they have discussed the problem correctly, identified the research gap, and explained the approach they took to address it.” Then, correct language use is regarded as indispensable; it is the vehicle through which ideas can be smoothly communicated. SL13 mentions that “if there are issues with language, I will include it in my feedback, as both native and non-native speakers often have difficulties with academic writing.” More emphatically, SL56 says, “I give feedback on spelling, grammar, punctuation and referencing ... It would be the same feedback for both native and non-native students. SL24 avows, “all students have to get the mechanics right before their work can be read.” In the same token, SL66 sums up, “we provide structured feedback according to set categories for all students e.g., relevance; coverage; accuracy; structure and organisation; quality of argumentation and critical evaluation; quality of expression and presentation”.

It is worth mentioning that some lecturers tend to give comments on language just in the initial stages of writing a dissertation. In the next phases, students are supposed to take responsibility to refine their final products. SL41 succinctly puts it, “In early drafts, I will take the time to point out grammatical errors, sentence construction problems, spelling errors, etc. However, it is not my role to proofread students' work. I need to concentrate on the use of theory, construction of argument, logical sequence, etc.” Also, SL32 candidly reveals his dislike of correcting language, “the best feedback I can give engages with the conceptual elements of the research. The worst feedback I offer engages mostly with the language and writing abilities of the student.”

Most lecturers mention that the same feedback is given to both native and nonnative students. SL49 states, “I give individualised feedback to native and non-native students and marking is anonymous.”. SL21 notes, “I don't know which students are which because we have anonymous marking ... so, I do give the same to everyone”. Similarly, SL41 states, “we would not know when marking if our students were native or non-native speakers”. However, a few lecturers concede that non-native English-speaking students come across serious problems in writing and thus deserve more attention than others. As SL4 mentions, “corrections made for both native and non-native speakers but usually more for nonnative speakers”. Similarly, SL29 mentions, “I cannot provide substantial feedback to many of the nonnative English-speaking students as I spent a long time attempting to decipher their papers and correcting basic errors”.

In the final analysis, the last section of the survey entitled “Further comments” discloses that lecturers neither raise the issue of native English at all, nor do they ask students to write in an English native-like manner. They just provide students with feedback on their language, content and methodology. Now, let's move to what lecturers declare in the interviews in the next paragraphs.

The interviews administered to sought lecturers' perspectives about the adherence of their native and non-native students towards to the concept of English native-like writing. The interviews ultimately aimed to decorticate the interviewees' feedback on students' works considering their reactions towards deviant forms from native-like English norms that native English academics would not use on the ground that they are considered as erroneous forms. In total, 33 lecturers participated in this interview. Only four lecturers maintain that postgraduates are supposed to write in an English native-like manner. IL15 (Interviewee Lecturer) points out, "yes, we do require native-like academic English for this." Also, IL31 states, "we do require native like English". Similarly, IL62 notes, "this is expected. I am a non-native speaker, and I expect this from my non-native English PhD students". Insistently enough, IL48 upholds that "There is an expectation that if you are studying a postgraduate course at an English university, you should be able to produce writing at a native-like level. I do find both native and non-native students struggling to meet this requirement".

Some lecturers seem to confuse the terms 'native like English' and 'academic writing' and therefore use them interchangeably. For illustration, IL9 argues, "yes, they do expect academic English". Also, IL37 shares this idea, "yes, we do ... the problems arise if the writing is so poor that the meaning is not clear. In the same token, IL56 infers, "yes, we do expect students from all destinations to present their work in good academic English". Concomitantly, IL2 deduces, "we require academic writing, which is structured". Still, IL4 mentions, "I think this requirement is an integral part of MA studies". Generally, native like English is equated to academic English.

The great majority of lecturers declare that postgraduate students are not required to write in an English native-like way. For instance, IL20 responds, "no, they are not required to write native-like". Also, IL42 specifies, "there is no such official criterion at any level of the institution." In the same context, IL53 asserts "we do not have a formal requirement for 'native-like'". Similarly, IL8 notifies, "we do not require it, but it does inevitably help in terms of achieving higher marks." Forcefully, IL6 exclaims bluntly, "there is no requirement to be 'native-like' as this would not necessarily mean 'good!'". What is required in postgraduation studies is the use of correct academic English. IL7 highlights, "it is not a matter of being nativelylike, it is a matter of producing writing that is appropriate for the context: e.g., genre, register, lexical choices, and formatting. Further, IL24 emphasizes on language, "there is no instruction given that they need to attain a native level in their writing. Not only unrealistic; it is also meaningless." Confirming this tendency, IL8 states, "no such explicit requirement given, but writing needs to be of a sufficient quality to deliver convincing analysis of data." In alignment with this, IL61 reports, "clarity of meaning is more important than a native-speaker norm". Also, IL9 contends, "there is no explicit requirement that English be native-like." In conjunction with this, IL41 contends, "'native-like' is not the issue as NS sometimes cannot write clearly." Nevertheless, IL7 admits, "we expect law students to write like lawyers...as there are expressions, they can learn to use to set out legal rules." Further, IL18 cries out, "Require' is not the right word. We want to encourage them

to develop an eye for what sounds right because this is the gateway to future publication and employment". In sum, lecturers seem to focus on the correct academic use of language that helps students not only to write their dissertations but also to publish their subsequent research articles.

Analysis of lecturers' feedback on students' written productions

In their comments on non-native students' written work, lecturers apparently dismiss the notion of native like English and vehemently lay emphasis on correct English language and appropriate research methodology. LF17 (Lecturer Feedback 17) comments, "make sure you proofread your work carefully ... there are random errors that you will be able to identify by proofreading your work." LF 2 exclaims about clarity, "I still don't know what you are going to do in this paper". LF25 counsels, "I suggest getting your work proofread carefully. If you think you cannot do it yourself, you may need to choose a professional proofreader from the list provided by your tutor". Likewise, in their comments on native students' written work, lecturers exclusively focus on content, form, and research methodology without referring to the notion of native-like English at all. LF38 plainly comments, "many native speakers struggle to write in an appropriate academic style as it is something with which they are not that familiar." Also, LF26 notes "you write fluently and are able to synthesize ideas from more than one source to support your dialogue." Moreover, LF5 criticizes methodology, "ensure that you make specific links between what you observe and what you have read." Interestingly, LF13 writes on citations, "a lot of generality report is very similar to the source and needs to be in quote marks."

As grammar errors seem to abound and distort the value of academic works, many lecturers express deep concerns about this common issue that they found very hard to cope with due to the high number of postgraduates. LF22 explains, "sometimes the flow was disrupted by some grammatical errors. I found it hard to work around these" As a remedy, some lecturers advise their students to have a proofreading of their works. LF39 signals, "there are still a lot of grammatical errors in your work affecting the flow of your writing. You need to ask someone to proofread your work before it is submitted." In line with this, LF29 points out, "you must ask someone to proofread your work for you as there are too many grammatical errors for me to correct."

Students' perspectives

The students' open-ended survey explores whether lecturers or departments require students to write assignments or dissertations in academic English that should be native-like and whether they are able to meet this requirement. Students are divided on this issue into three groups. First, several students expressed their unawareness of the topic. For instance, SS70 signals, "I am not aware of any issues". Likewise, SS06 pinpoints, "the term ' native-like' is subjective and it is certainly never used". Correspondingly, SS55 avows, "I'm not sure that I understand what native-like means". Consistently, SS47 acknowledged "I don't know if they expect me to write as a native speaker...it would be a problem for me".

The second category, representing few students, claim that they are required to produce native-like writing. SS63 haphazardly conjectures, “I’m guessing that it is expected to be native-like.” SS50 presumes, “we are supposed to write our final thesis and our papers in a native-like way.” Correspondingly, SS75 notes, “yes, they did, and some of the non-native students on my course struggled with this.” In the same perspective, SS16 states “yes, I believe assignments should be native-like”. Similarly, SS11 admits that “yes, I do think they require us to write native-like. As a native speaker this does not concern me, but maybe it is a challenge for non-native students”.

The third category which represents the vast majority claim that they are not required to write in a native-like way. SS33 points out, “No, I’ve never been told to write like a native.” Also, SS67 avows that “there is no specific requirement that essay should be native-like, but the essay should be academic style”. Backing up this argument, SS11 affirms, “they do not require it to be native like, but it should be an academic piece of work” Additionally, SS07 notes “they don’t require us to do so but advise us to avoid some mistakes.” SS87 notes, “writing good English is a requirement, but it does not have to be native-like.” Eventually, SS55 sums up, “they do not expect the writing style to be native-like, but they expect it to be coherent and organised.”

The students' open-ended survey also allows us to collect information about students' perceptions towards their lecturers' written feedback vis-à-vis its adherence to using native-like English. By and large, students report that they are not required to use any kind of English that is not native-like. The following excerpts illustrate this propensity. SS56 clarifies, “I have not been asked to write like natives but to improve my grammar.” In symbiosis with this tendency, SS18 confirms “I have never received feedback about not using native style, but there are some comments about the structure of my assignment.”

In the final section of the open-ended survey, the students present further comments on their academic writing experience. After investigating all the students' comments, we discover that students did not mention the issue of native-like English at all. Yet, they talked about the problems they experienced in Academic English and all its hitches and glitches. For example, SS78 cites, “it is hard and takes lots of practice!”. Also, SS33 underlines, “academic writing is complex, and not all natives can write in an academic style”. The same attitude is expressed by SS22, “I found it challenging to adapt despite being a native-speaker.” Persuasively, SS63 remarks, “I think that academic writing is difficult for both native and non-native English speakers.” A non-native SS6 alludes “I was very disappointed as I faced a lot of challenges, and I underestimated my knowledge and performance”.

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews shows that students are not required to produce native-like English. Arguably, SI5 clearly mentions, “I do not understand the question of native like requirement”. Also, SI6 states, “I’ve never been told to write like a native”. Still SI4 confirms, “I have not received any feedback on using native-like English”. Again, SS12 concludes “they do not expect the writing style to be native-like, but to be coherent and organized”. Thus,

postgraduates are required to write in clear, coherent, and comprehensible English.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that native-like English seems to not be required at all by many departments in some UK universities. In corroboration with this policy, the majority of UK academic staff and their native and non-native English students tend to agree that native academic English is not at all mandatory when writing course works, assignments, or dissertations in postgraduate programmes. The results of this study are obtained from three research instruments: the lecturers' and students' open surveys, their semi-structured interviews as well as lecturers' feedback on students' written productions. They demonstrate that total conformity to native English norms was not required at all. These findings are incongruent with a number of research studies (Jenkins 2011, 2014; Prodromou 2007; Trudgill 2002; Widdowson 2013) that maintain students' conformity to native academic English was not merely desired but considered extremely indispensable in English-speaking countries.

The findings also demonstrate ample commonalities between lecturers' and students' perspectives about the status of native English in postgraduation studies. A total of 88% lecturers declare that postgraduate students are not required to write in an English native-like manner. Likewise, 92% of the students shared the same idea of their academic staff that there is no explicit regulation stipulating that native English is a *sine qua non* of key aspects in academic performance. Furthermore, these conclusions are strongly supported by a body of literature underpinning the importance of rigorous standards for conveying ideas but not necessarily following native-like English (Matsuda 2019; Monfared 2018; Monfared 2020; Sadeghpour and Sharifian 2019; Tribble 2017). The results indicate that what matters in postgraduate writing across departments in UK universities is not to write in native-like English but to write in formal academic writing supposed to be clear, comprehensible, and methodical. What is regarded as highly demanding for non-native postgraduate students is to expect them to write like natives in academic settings. This is neither reasonable nor feasible for most students (Medina 2019; Holmes 2022; Holmes, Waterbury, Baltrinic and Davis 2018; Tribble 2019; Tuck 2018).

It is worth mentioning that academic writing is cognitively more challenging. It needs to be learned and developed out of disciplinary studies with targeted instruction for all novice writers regardless of their native or non-native speaker status. The results demonstrate that instances of native English occur in all samples of student writing as both types of students do not differ in terms of reasoning, research skills and methodology. Importantly, numerous fields of study such as sciences, business, law... etc. are genuinely ingrained in English terminology that students must acquire and develop technical familiarity with. This supports what Ferguson, Perez-Llantada and Plo (2011) confirm that academic writing is learned via a prolonged formal education.

At an advanced level, non-disconformity to native-like English may not be quite prominent in writing but can be protruding in speaking through pronunciation, accent and intonation. More importantly, this study demonstrates that the academic

staff themselves affirm that they give the same type of feedback to native and non-native-speaker students related mainly to the content of the work and not to native-like English language issues. The implications drawn from this study reveal that academic English does not belong to native English students. This accords with the findings of Swales (2004) that both native and non-native students experience similar difficulties in writing academic English.

Students in this study also experienced real difficulties in academic writing. This accords with the findings of some researchers (Anderson and Cuesta-Medina 2019; Holmes 2022; Holmes et al. 2018; Morton, Storch and Thompson 2015; Tribble 2019; Tuck 2018). The results of this study reveal that lecturers and students alike recognize that the concept 'native-like English' is awkward and equivocal, and this complies with the proposals of some researchers (Aneja 2016; Kuteeva 2014; Tribble 2019). The findings also indicate that academic language must be learned via lengthy education by novice native or non-native speakers irrespective of the conformity to nativeness. This conclusion corroborates what previous studies have already identified (Ferguson, 2007; Macleod, Barnes and Huttly 2019; Shin 2019; Zhao 2017). In addition, the study shows that some lecturers stand against referring students to professional proofreaders because this exertion helps debilitated students to get good grades. This finding lies in agreement with many studies that fervently oppose this practice (Alhojailan, 2019; Harwood, 2018, 2019; Mumin, 2022). In sum, the three research instruments used in this study clearly demonstrate that the academic staff in the UK universities do not require their postgraduate students to conform to the use of native-like English. However, they only urge them to follow the well-known writing conventions of Academic English used worldwide.

One important implication of the findings is that UK universities need to make some changes in their academic writing policies, requirements and practices. First, academic writing policies need to clearly emphasize that all students (native and non-native) should not follow the native speaker model and to encourage them to express their ideas and thoughts in an intelligible English. Second, writing policies should explain to students that judging the content of their writing will not be based on a particular version of native English. Third, academic staff need to be consistent and flexible when correcting students' written works. This will involve spending a lot of time interacting with their students and explaining what is expected from them in their written works. It will also involve raising academic staff's awareness of the multi-faced difficulties that non-native students face when writing for academic purposes.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored native and non-native English students as well as academic staff perceptions of conformity or non-conformity to native English in postgraduate academic writing in UK universities. The main finding is that native and non-native students are expected to write in clear and comprehensible English regardless of being native-like. The current study supports the claim that academic writing can be challenging (Murray, Thow, Moore and Murphy 2008). In general, lecturers

want their students to converge with canonical grammar norms and writing conventions. At a postgraduation level, the mastery of language is taken for granted before embarking on any research work. Lecturers' real concerns about students' research works include basic elements such as presentation, content, organisation, critical thinking, methodology, edition, and referencing. In fact, academic writing is a critical process that needs a long time to develop, and students need to be engaged, determined, and motivated. Also, it should be noted that there is no magic approach used for all situations. Wingate (2012) asserts that there is no "one-size-fits-all model of writing instruction". Yet, Thorpe, Snell, Davey-Evans and Talman (2017) insist that pre-sessional English language programmes contribute to promoting the academic performance of students.

As with any research work, this study is not without of limitations. Firstly, the sample in this study was small in comparison with the size of the NNES and NES population in UK universities. The implications that have been drawn from this study can only be suggestive. Secondly, the online open-ended format of the questionnaire might not enable respondents to answer the questions easily. Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent academic writing challenges faced by non-native English students are similar or different from those faced by native English students at a postgraduation level. As Trenkic and Warmington (2018) contend, much less is known about how language skills differ at university level between native and non-native students. Habibie (2019) also sees that further studies should tackle this issue that native English speakers experience less grammatical difficulties in academic writing. On the other hand, it is hoped that insights obtained from the findings of this study might shape future research questions and provide a basis for exploring the issue of conformity to native English in other language skills, contexts and disciplines.

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