

Enhancing Abstract Writing for Non-native English-speaking PhD Students: A Case Study of Italian PhD Students

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Abstract

This study explores the challenges faced by Italian PhD students in writing effective scientific abstracts, focusing on a collaborative academic writing workshop conducted in a university classroom. Recognizing the critical role of abstracts in academic communication, the paper highlights unique obstacles for non-native English speakers, particularly linguistic issues that hinder clarity, coherence, and conciseness. Drawing on literature and workshop findings, the study proposes targeted strategies and practical activities to enhance abstract writing skills, ultimately promoting better academic communication for PhD candidates, offering a framework which improves abstract writing skills. By fostering better academic communication, the study aims to enhance the professional development of PhD candidates and their integration into the global research community.

Keywords: Abstract writing, PhD students, Non-native English speakers, Linguistic challenges, Rhetorical moves analysis

1. Introduction

Abstracts are critical components of academic papers, acting as the first point of contact between researchers and their audience. Thus, the importance of a well-written abstract cannot be overstated, since it captures the essence of a research paper, and serves as a gateway to the author's scientific research statement. Crafting an effective abstract to enable readers to quickly assess the relevance of the research is an essential skill for PhD candidates, posing unique challenges, particularly for those whose first language is not English. In this respect, the study specifically draws on a collaborative practical teaching experience in an academic writing workshop designed for PhD students at the Faculty of Economics, Sapienza University of Rome (Italy). This work investigates some of the obstacles Italian PhD students

experience, and proposes strategies for improving abstract writing skills, thereby promoting better academic communication (Flowerdew, 1999; Cargill and O'Connor, 2009). Non-native English speakers, often encounter specific linguistic challenges that hinder their ability to write effective abstracts. Identifying these challenges is crucial for developing targeted strategies for improvement. For this purpose, this study examines some of the most prevalent linguistic issues Italian students encounter.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the situational context of the case study. Section 3 reviews the relevant literature, followed by an analysis of some prevalent difficulties which emerged in the workshop activities. Section 4 proposes sample practical activities focussing on clarity, coherence, and conciseness, which can be adopted as a framework for improving the quality of scientific abstract writing.

2. Case Study and Approach

This study describes a practical action research teaching experience for fifteen PhD students during an academic writing workshop held in the Department of Methods and Models for Economics, Territory and Finance (MEMOTEF), at the Faculty of Economics, Sapienza University of Rome (Italy), in the period February 2024. The graduates were working on PhDs in the fields of Economic Geography, Statistics and Demography. These are core degree subjects in the Faculty of Economics, therefore it is particularly important for the academic teaching staff to provide courses that help PhD students develop their effective speaking and writing abilities so they can use them in their coursework and possibly in their future academic careers. The majority of these graduate students are Italian (three students are from abroad). All the students enrolled on the course declared a B2 proficiency level, but most acknowledged difficulties in following some core courses held in English. The students' main difficulties were at the productive level, rather than the receptive level; that is, although they were able to listen and grasp major concepts in their lectures, their main difficulties lay in their speaking and writing assignments. In response to these evident difficulties, the PhD program directors have introduced a workshop which specifically focuses on abstract writing for non-native speakers. This workshop is carried out on a yearly basis aimed at providing tailored instruction and resources to help students navigate common challenges of academic writing in English. Therefore, over the period of their PhD year they are required to attend a module dedicated to *Strategies for Academic publications* and *Academic Writing*. The course consists of 8 two-hour lessons: 4 two-hour lessons are held for the *Strategies for Academic publications* component (not reported in this study), and 4 two-hour lessons (the second part of the course) consist of practical activities for academic writing aimed at helping students approach scientific English-language quality journals. In these lessons critical aspects of abstract writing are emphasized, i.e. creating accurate titles, structuring abstracts concisely, in order to introduce research in a compelling manner. The writing course also deals with how to present an introductory section with research questions (not reported here).

A research-based teaching approach guided the workshop activities. (See the literature review section). Through practical activities and exercises (section 4), and peer feedback with constructive comments, students practiced restructuring their abstracts to improve readability

and flow, addressing several common linguistic challenges along the way. Hence, the main aim of the module is to familiarize students with the common structure of abstracts in English, to ensure their abstracts meet international standards and to provide students with the effective tools to be able to continue their research studies once they have completed their PhD thesis and potentially approach the world of academic publications.

3. Literature Review

The following literature review provides a comprehensive exploration of theoretical frameworks, pedagogical applications and rhetorical structures, that underpin academic writing, particularly abstract composition. By drawing on foundational studies such as those by Hyland (2000) and Swales (2014), and more recently Hyland et al. (2022), Nava (2023), and Bondi and Nocella (2024), this section underscores both the strengths of existing research and the areas where further exploration is warranted.

Hyland et al. (2022), provide a comprehensive examination of metadiscourse as a critical tool for communication across different languages and genres, highlighting the importance of metalanguage for organizing discourse and engaging the readers. They identify two primary functional categories, i.e., interactive metadiscourse, which helps organize content and guides readers through arguments (e.g., transitions, frame markers); and interactional metadiscourse, used to reflect the writer's stance and engage readers by managing interpersonal relations (e.g., hedges, boosters). Metadiscourse is also shaped by cultural norms and rhetorical traditions, which is the case for abstract writing. For example, English tends to emphasize clarity and reader engagement, while other languages may prioritize different textual elements. Their work particularly highlights cultural variations in academic writing practices. This nuanced understanding of metadiscourse is relevant for abstract writing, where conciseness and clarity must harmonize with cultural and disciplinary norms.

The concept of scientific abstracts as a distinct genre with rhetorical devices integrated into their composition is greatly advanced by Swales (2014). This study particularly draws on his move analysis methodology, which identifies the arranging structures of academic genres. A condensed outline of moves for writing research articles serves as a useful writing manual for academics and PhD students who do not speak English as their first language. It is also beneficial for students to be aware of certain rhetorical devices, for example, parallelism, antithesis, and rhetorical questions, which strengthen the collocation and coherence of abstracts for an international academic standard

The following is a summary of Swales (2014) moves analysis framework which can be applied as a guide to writing effective abstracts. Swales identifies 6 essential steps. Move 1 introduces the research environment by clearly defining the scientific question, emphasizing the value of the topic, and outlining the objectives. This step frames the research's purpose and draws the audience's attention to its significance. Move 2 reviews prior studies to establish the research's place within the scholarly discourse. By synthesizing critical findings, researchers highlight gaps in the existing literature and the need for their work. Move 3 focuses on the study's specific objectives, presenting its hypotheses and unique contributions to the field, while pinpointing areas where existing knowledge is lacking. For example: 'This study aims to

investigate how socioeconomic factors affect people's ability to access healthcare in these remote areas as there is a dearth of literature currently available.' Move 4 details the methodology, including study design, data collection, and analysis methods, providing transparency and enabling readers to evaluate the study's validity. Examples include mixed-methods approaches or longitudinal studies, which help solidify the study's credibility. For instance, the following are examples from social science studies: 'After applying a mixed-methods approach, data on employee job satisfaction was gathered using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires'; 'Using a time-based study design, we tracked participants' cognitive development from childhood to adolescence, utilizing standardized cognitive tests.'

Move 5 presents the research findings, succinctly summarizing the results and offering new insights that distinguish the study from prior work. This needs to be well-articulated so as to clearly and effectively summarize the key findings of the research. Researchers draw conclusions and attempt to offer new insights. For example: 'The market research brought to light three specific niche market clusters defined according to certain product features, leading to new market segmentation strategies.' Finally, Move 6 discusses the implications and significance of the findings, outlining practical applications, contributions to the field, and opportunities for future research. An example would be: 'The results of this research could potentially guide the government and authorities working on the improvement of healthcare services.'

More recently, Nava (2023) and Bondi and Nocella (2024) have extended the research in scientific abstract writing by examining the pedagogical implications. Nava (2023) explores how evolving societal norms shape teaching practices, advocating for a learner-centered approach that acknowledges the active role of students in mastering academic writing. Bondi and Nocella (2024), through their corpus-based analysis of academic texts by Italian students, reveal the challenges non-native English writers face when adapting to global academic norms. Their findings underscore a critical tension: while English abstracts often emphasize explicit and audience-oriented clarifications, Italian academic writing tends to rely on implicit explanations rooted in shared cultural assumptions. They suggest integrating explicit teaching of code glosses and other metadiscourse elements into writing courses. These latter two studies collectively suggest the need for pedagogical interventions that integrate explicit teaching of metadiscourse and rhetorical structures.

Despite the depth of these analyses, the current literature's main gap is the lack of integrated practical tools for enhancing abstract writing. In effect, how non – native English-speaking researchers navigate the interplay between native rhetorical traditions and global academic conventions in abstract writing needs to be more fully addressed. Additionally, although the pedagogical implications of Swales' move analysis are well-documented, practical tools or training programs designed to teach these strategies remain underdeveloped. There is also a lack of integration between metadiscourse frameworks and Swales' rhetorical structures, which, if combined, could provide a more holistic model for abstract composition. Moreover, much of the existing research focuses on theoretical discussions rather than empirical validation.

By addressing these gaps, the current study aims to contribute to the field. It attempts to bridge linguistic and rhetorical frameworks. This integration will provide a comprehensive approach to abstract writing, offering insights into both structural organization and linguistic precision. Furthermore, the study develops and tests pedagogical tools, such as instructional modules or digital platforms, to train students in applying these integrated frameworks. Empirical validation of these interventions will offer evidence of their efficacy in enhancing abstract quality. In conclusion, this study seeks to build on foundational works in the field while addressing apparent gaps. By offering an integrated framework for abstract writing and developing practical teaching tools, it aims to advance both the theory and practice of academic writing, making it more accessible and effective for scholars across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

4. Findings: The Challenges for Italian PhD Students

Italian PhD students face several challenges in abstract writing due to differences in syntax, vocabulary, and academic and cultural conventions (Nava, 2023; Bondi and Nocella, 2024).

One significant issue is the difference in language structure and syntax between Italian and English. These structural differences between Italian and English can be quite challenging. First, Italian students are accustomed to a more elaborate and descriptive style, often featuring longer sentences, and lengthy introductory sentences with multiple clauses. In contrast, English abstracts aim to be concise, generally prioritizing direct language. For instance, the following is an example of the opening sentence of an Italian student's abstract (grammatical errors have been removed), *'In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of extreme heat and its effects on biodiversity, which has led researchers to explore various ecological models for the environment'*. Whereas, in English, this information could be condensed to, *'This study explores the impact of climate change on biodiversity through ecological models.'* To allow students to practice brevity and adjust to English conventions, one of the workshop activities is to ask students to rewrite their abstracts prioritizing brevity as well as clarity.

Syntax and cohesion also present issues. While Italian often employs a Subject-Verb-Complement order, English typically follows a Subject-Verb-Object structure (Baker, 2003). This can lead to sentences like, *'The data were analyzed,'* being translated into wordier complement structures such as *'The data were analyzed by the researcher of the survey'*, which sounds awkward in English. Furthermore, these types of syntactical errors can obscure the intended meaning.

In addition, Italian students seem to struggle with cohesion and coherence issues due to differences in how ideas are typically connected in Italian versus English. Cohesion refers to the grammatical and lexical linking within a text, while coherence pertains to the overall understandability of the text (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). For example, a student wrote: *'The study aimed to investigate the effects. The results show a significant impact,'* These two sentences can be easily connected to make the necessary transitional phrases that create a logical flow in English, as *'The study aimed to investigate the effects, and the results indicate a significant impact.'* This subtle change enhances the abstract's readability and effectiveness,

making the text of the abstract flow logically. In the following example a student wrote: *'The research, conducted over eight months, aimed to analyze rising temperature effects on soil, and the results indicated a significant relationship'*. Whereas an effective English abstract would simplify this to, *'The eight-month study analyzed the effect of rising temperatures on soil, revealing a significant correlation'*, facilitating readability. Italian students may lack familiarity with such transitions.

Another prevalent structural occurrence within scientific English abstracts is the use of the passive voice, used to highlight the research rather than the researcher. We can compare the following examples of a student's writing: *'I calculated the figures for the correlation between the time period and age groups'*; whereas a more appropriate formulation in English would be, *'The time period/age correlation was calculated.'* This order requires not only an understanding of sentence structure but also an understanding of agency in English academic writing.

Limited vocabulary can restrict the student's ability to convey complex ideas succinctly, and any misunderstanding of the vocabulary can obscure meaning for an international audience. Italian PhD students may be inclined to use overly simplistic language or direct translations from Italian, which can result in inaccuracies or loss of meaning (Cameron, 2003). For example, a student wrote: *'The research is interesting for population distribution.'* Such simplifications by non-native English language speakers, may not fully engage the reader or accurately represent the research's significance. The following descriptor may be more precise and appropriate academically, *'This study contributes significantly to the understanding of population distribution.'* What is more, Italian students tend to construct sentences that are grammatically correct (in Italian), but sound unnatural in English.

Another challenge was the tendency for the Italian students to include phrases that are culture specific, and to use idiomatic expressions or phrases not easily translatable into English. For example, the Italian word 'argomento' does not mean 'argument' in English, depending on the context, but more often it refers to 'topic' or 'theme'. Italian students may also inadvertently use idiomatic expressions that lack direct English equivalents, creating confusion. For example, the Italian phrase "fare il punto" (to take stock) lacks a clear English counterpart in academic contexts and students could resort to a more universally understood phrase like 'assess the data.'

Encouraging vocabulary development is an essential strategy. For example, rather than using the term *good*, or *interesting* students could learn to use more precise and appropriate terms for an academic context, for example *beneficial*, or *advantageous*, *favourable*, *constructive*. Showing students how to expand their academic vocabulary through reading and practice can significantly improve their abstract writing. Resources such as academic word lists and thesauruses can aid this process (Coxhead, 2000).

5. Abstract Writing Practice and Workshop Activities

To address the above-mentioned challenges for abstract writing, several strategies can be implemented. First, the students need to familiarize themselves with the standard structure of

abstracts in English, which typically includes background, purpose, methods, results, and conclusions (Swales and Feak, 2009). In the Abstract Writing class students were given copies of various abstracts from high-impact journals of different scientific disciplines, which they then collaboratively analysed in depth, identifying key components, and recurrent lexical units and phrases. (See the sample abstract in Activity 1). The aim of this activity is to guide students to note the structure and moves of quality international abstracts providing a template for their abstracts. Analyzing examples from reputable journals allowed students to observe common structural patterns and terminology which helped them better organize their own research. With constant practice, familiarity with standard academic phrases and effective language use helped improve their ability to produce concise, impactful abstracts. Figure 1 identifies the moves of an abstract in a high impact international journal.

Activity 1 – Moves

Journal of the American Statistical Association

Bayesian Nonparametric Common Atoms Regression for Generating Synthetic Controls in Clinical Trials

The availability of electronic health records (EHR) has opened opportunities to supplement increasingly expensive and difficult to carry out randomized controlled trials (RCT) with evidence from readily available real world data. In this article, we use EHR data to construct synthetic control arms for treatment-only single arm trials. We propose a novel nonparametric Bayesian common atoms mixture model that allows us to find equivalent population strata in the EHR and the treatment arm and then resample the EHR data to create equivalent patient populations under both the single arm trial and the resampled EHR. Resampling is implemented via a density-free importance sampling scheme. Using the synthetic control arm, inference for the treatment effect can then be carried out using any method available for RCTs. Alternatively the proposed nonparametric Bayesian model allows straightforward model-based inference. In simulation experiments, the proposed method exhibits higher power than alternative methods in detecting treatment effects, specifically for nonlinear response functions. We apply the method to supplement single arm treatment-only glioblastoma studies with a synthetic control arm based on historical trials.

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Topic – says what has been done

In this article, we use EHR data to construct synthetic control arms for treatment-only single arm trials. We propose a novel nonparametric Bayesian common atoms mixture model that allows us to find equivalent population strata in the EHR and the treatment arm and then resample the EHR data to create equivalent patient populations under both the single arm trial and the resampled EHR.

Next two sentences explain the research /the data used, the research gap, and says why it is new

Resampling is implemented via a density-free importance sampling scheme. Using the synthetic control arm, inference for the treatment effect can then be carried out using any method available for RCTs. Alternatively the proposed nonparametric Bayesian model allows straightforward model-based inference.

Data and methods

In simulation experiments, the proposed method exhibits higher power than alternative methods in detecting treatment effects, specifically for nonlinear response functions. We apply the method to supplement single arm treatment-only glioblastoma studies with a synthetic control arm based on historical trials.

Findings and implications

Figure 1. Identified moves

A second practical writing activity in the workshop, was to guide students to explicitly state their research question so as to set a strong foundation for the rest of the abstract (Activity 2). For example, an abstract in environmental geography began, ‘*The study looks into the effects of deforestation on biodiversity in tropical rain forests to examine the connection between loss of habitat and extinction rates.*’ The students were then asked to think about reducing word count in order to reach a more concise research statement. For example, the above sentence can be condensed to: ‘*The effects of deforestation on biodiversity in tropical rainforests are considered in the study, whereby habitat loss and extinction rates are investigated.*’

Activity 2. Writing Research Titles

1. Research Title writing: Write the title by removing non-essential words

‘We employed a case study of 60 young adolescents around Italy aged between 15 - 18 years to assess how waiting list volume affects the outcomes of anxiety related disease therapy in patients: results indicated a positive correlation between increased waiting list volume and negative prognosis after the anxiety therapy procedures’.

2. Grammar - Correct the title

- i) Exploration of recent trends in the number of British pubs and how these vary by the neighbourhood type
- ii) The implications of AI Chatbots in Education: the Challenges and the solution
- iii) The killer cities and industrious cities? The new data and evidence in 250 years of urban growth
- iv) The Urban sprawls and racial inequality in the intergenerational mobility

As regards grammar and structure, the workshop incorporated exercises targeting syntax, vocabulary, and cohesion. Focused writing exercises helped students address syntactical errors and expand their vocabulary. In the following Activities 4, 5, and 6, students were asked to fill in the gaps with the correct verb tense, passive voice, and lexical units and fixed phrases prevalent in scientific academic writing. Activity 7 provides students with practice on identifying and avoiding repetition in order to craft more effective abstracts. This sort of language practice, also carried out in peer groups for constructive feedback, encouraged them to refine their writing. For instance, the students tended to initially write abstracts that were too verbose, but through iterative revisions and feedback sessions, they were able to practice writing a more succinct format.

Peer review sessions enabled students to critique and improve each other's abstracts, fostering collaboration and mutual learning (Murray and Moore, 2006). This collaborative approach not only improves individual writing but also fosters a supportive academic community. Feedback from supervisors or peers can help refine their writing and ensure that the abstract accurately reflects their research.

Activity 3. Fill in the blanks with the correct tense of the verb

Persistent racial inequality in socioeconomic status within urban areas _____(be) a significant concern in both the US and European countries. Differences across racial groups in intergenerational mobility (IM) _____(identify) as a key source of this persistence. However, efforts to understand racial inequality in IM _____rarely _____(consider) the role of urban sprawl. This article _____(argue) that urban sprawl _____(affect) differences in IM between racial groups directly and indirectly through racial segregation, racial bias, and social capital. We _____(analyze) data from 874 metropolitan counties in the US using structural equation models to test these direct and indirect effects of sprawl on racial inequality in IM. We _____(find) that urban sprawl was negatively associated with racial inequality in IM. The direct effect, which we partially attribute to higher racial disparities in social capital in more compact counties, was statistically significant. For the indirect effects, racial segregation _____(have) the largest mediating effects between urban sprawl and racial inequality in IM, followed by economic connectedness (EC) and racial bias. The net indirect effect of sprawl on racial inequality in IM _____(be) negative because negative indirect effects through racial segregation and EC _____(outweigh) positive indirect effects through racial bias. Our findings demonstrate the significant role of urban form in racial inequality in IM.

Activity 4. Adjectives and adverbs

relatively inconsequential *substantially* *much more slowly*

relatively dependent *especially* *slowest*

Why did rural areas recover from the great recession _____ than metropolitan areas? Due to declining tax revenues and intergovernmental aid, employment in the American local government sector fell _____ after the great recession. Cuts to local public employment were _____ large, long-lasting and consequential in rural areas, which have become _____ on public-sector employment and intergovernmental transfers. The public sector is _____ in urban America, but in many rural places, a decade after the great recession, the public sector was the _____ category of employment to recover and the leading source of long-term job losses.

Activity 5. Fill in the blank from the lexical units below

Our findings indicate that *has contributed to* *given*

We use data from *Previous research has primarily relied on*

Contrary to *explanation for this trend*

The growing economic resemblance of spouses _____ rising inequality by increasing the number of couples in which there are two high- or two low-earning partners. The dominant _____ is increased assortative mating. _____ cross-sectional data and thus has been unable to disentangle changes in assortative mating from changes in the division of spouses' paid labor—a potentially key mechanism _____ the dramatic rise in wives' labor supply. _____ the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to decompose the increase in the correlation between spouses' earnings and its contribution to inequality between 1970 and 2013, due to (a) changes in assortative mating, and (b) changes in the division of paid labor. _____ what has often been assumed, the rise of economic homogamy and its contribution to inequality is largely attributable to changes in the division of paid labor rather than changes in sorting on earnings or earnings potential. _____ the rise of economic homogamy cannot be explained by hypotheses centered on meeting and matching opportunities, and they show where in this process inequality is generated and where it is not.

Activity 6. Substitute repetition

We analyze whether local retail services are considered a nuisance or an amenity and how this distinction is capitalized into residential property values. Using a rich, micro-spatial dataset on property sales transactions and business activity in New York City, we analyze the impact of access to neighborhood retail services on residential sales prices. We use two instruments to channel supply-side drivers of retail change and to address concerns of endogeneity between changes in retail activity and property values. Results show that retail services that are more frequently consumed and experiential, and are located in relatively more mixed-use neighborhoods are positively capitalized into property values. Results also show that residents also pay more to be closer to more diverse retail clusters, and relatively less to be closer to chains. This is shown across smaller 1-to-4 family homes and also in larger condos/coops and multi-family rental buildings.

Online writing resources are an effective support for abstract writing which students can be guided to use. There are numerous resources available that can assist non-native speakers in improving their writing skills. Websites such as the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) (Note 1) offer comprehensive guidelines on academic writing. Software tools like *Grammarly* (Note 2) assist in identifying grammatical errors and improving overall language clarity. These resources can serve as valuable aids in the revision process, allowing students to refine their abstracts before submission. In this way, regular writing practice, coupled with constructive feedback, can significantly enhance students' writing abilities.

6. Conclusion

As we can see improving abstract writing for Italian PhD students, involves a multifaceted approach that addresses linguistic challenges and cultural differences. By focusing on structure, vocabulary enhancement, regular writing practice, and targeted resources, these students can be given the tools to produce more effective and engaging abstracts, facilitating enhanced communication within the global academic community.

These sorts of practical activities in the abstract writing workshop can help PhD students internalize the expected format and language particular to English abstract writing. Regular writing practice, coupled with constructive feedback, can significantly improve their writing abilities. From this case study Italian PhD students willingly took advantage of these resources and genuinely felt they were able to improve their English proficiency and writing skills. As a matter of fact, they requested more writing workshops.

The findings from this study underscore the importance of tailored instruction in abstract writing for non-native English speakers. Italian PhD students benefit from an understanding of the structural and cultural conventions of English abstracts, and focused workshops can substantially enhance their skills. As shown by the practical activities in the academic writing workshop, enhancing abstract writing for non-native English-speaking PhD students, requires a multifaceted approach that addresses linguistic challenges and cultural differences. By

addressing challenges in syntax, vocabulary, cohesion, and cultural expectations, these workshops equip students with the tools necessary to meet international academic standards, facilitating better communication of their research, leading to potential success in their academic careers.

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Notes

Note 1. *Purdue Online Writing Lab* - https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html - e (accessed September 2024)

Note 2. *Grammarly* - <https://www.grammarly.com/> (accessed September 2024)

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