Constructing meaning in a different language: the case of doctoral students in a French University

Albana Canollari-Baze[1] and Gaby David[2]

Abstract. Drawing from a *constructivist* approach, this qualitative research presents results of teaching the Doctoral English Course (DEC) at the Center for Languages (CDL), University Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis. The DEC aims to train doctoral candidates in the practice of scientific communication in English. By allowing students to (re)think and approach their thesis in English, concrete research methods and tools to produce results related to their research were provided. The analysis explored students' experiences on classroom activities and their reflections at the end of the course. Students reflected on meaningful experiences, collaborative learning, and impact of the process in developing their research. Overall, the study offers insightful contributions on the way rethinking in a different language influenced the way scientific meaning is reconstructed.

Keywords: collaborative learning, constructing meaning, doctoral students, DEC.

1.   Introduction

Rooted in the cognitive developmental theory of Piaget (1971) and in the socio-cultural development of Vygotsky (1978), *constructivism* views knowledge as a representation of reality and the learner in the process of constructing that reality individually and socially. Notions within constructivism have emerged as a leading paradigm in developing pedagogy in higher education. Kaufman (2004) viewed language pedagogy as an integrated instructional approach that underscores the centrality and diversity of learners emphasizing their individual and collective active engagement in a learning context.

1. University Paris 8 and Schiller International University, Paris, France; albana.baze@univ-paris8.fr
2. TransCrit, Paris 8 and IRCAV, Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, France; championnet4@yahoo.fr; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7562-5767

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In 2018, the CDL and the Doctoral Schools at the University Paris 8 implemented for the first time the first DEC (supplementary materials, Appendix 1). Three consecutive years of the implementation inspired the authors to study the incipient development of this course, which aims to familiarize students to reflect on their theses in English. Doctoral candidates came from various disciplines and were at different stages of their academic path. Students were native French speakers as well as international students for whom English was their second (L2) or third language. This study offers insight of PhD students' experiences in thinking about their thesis in English and it explores the way they construct meaning in another language. In particular, two research questions were addressed.

- What are the doctoral students' experiences in the DEC?

- How do doctoral students construct meaning in content creation (speaking and writing)?

The course textbook (Terrell, 2015) offered concrete methods and tools to support scientific research through academic written and oral communications.

2.   Methodology

This qualitative study utilized thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore students' reflections on an end of course survey. In addition, content analysis was applied to submitted academic work before and after intervention. Reflections on class activities offered thought-provoking insights on the impact of L2 in developing their research topics.

In this study, 34 students (13 Native French, 21 Non-Native English speakers[3]) who took an online DEC via Zoom, agreed to participate. Instructed via a student-centered approach, participants who possessed a B2 English level engaged in creating and presenting their own content (via PowerPoint posters, abstracts, texts, etc.). At the end, they reflected on their experiences focusing on the process of rethinking their research in English. They responded to a survey in English administered via email (supplementary materials, Appendix 2).

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3. Non-native students' nationalities: Argentina, Armenia, Algeria, Ecuador, Italy, Israel, Haiti, Ghana, Germany, Lebanon, Switzerland, Tunisia, etc.

3. Results

Three interconnected main themes emerged from the analysis[4] of students' responses: *experiences*, *collaborative learning*, and *impact on the research process*. Content analysis on students' delivered work focused on how they constructed academic meaning in English, accounting for a fourth theme: *constructing meaning*. The quotes used for illustration speak for the majority of them and are representative of the group under study.

3.1. Experiences

The majority of the students (31) viewed the DEC as an opportunity to upgrade their general and scientific English language skills, with some (19) expressing a sense of raised awareness in the importance of participating in international conferences.

> "This online course is a really great opportunity for me […]. I am looking to further improve my English in vocabulary and to practice speaking, so I can speak English fluently, and to grasp the maximum knowledge in scientific communication".

Most participants (28) elaborated the course as shifting their perspective while rethinking their research components.

> "The exchanges we were able to have throughout the workshop allowed me to rethink my research questions and see my topic with new perspectives".

Interestingly, some students (12) expressed how the course 'broke' feelings of loneliness, claiming: "It [the course] breaks the researcher's loneliness, and it helps to find a common denominator in our daily work". Others (12) expressed that it helped build confidence and self-esteem.

3.2. Collaborative learning

Generated from the analysis, *collaborative learning* was a theme enriched through: (1) the facilitators, (2) the tools taught/used, and (3) the peers. Half of the students valued the role of their facilitators as mediators, while emphasizing the importance of receiving feedback on the spot.

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4. For an illustration of the thematic analysis, please see supplementary materials, Appendix 3.

"Expert feedback is crucial for a young researcher. Having a professor who can comment 'live' on mistakes or an approach is essential to progress".

Students (28) identified taught tools as mediators of their thinking process: "DEC helped me to focus on the problem statement and to rethink my thesis in a different way". Others (11) also reflected on their peers' mediation: "this workshop is a great tool to better formulate one's research subject in a simple way as well as to learn and exchange about other researchers' subjects and methodologies".

3.3. Impact on research process

The majority (n.30) elaborated the course as impactful and that it supported them "to think about the aspects that I can and cannot control in my research process". Overall, it was evident that students believed that the course reinforced "a solid foundation to write a scientific article in English".

3.4. Constructing meaning

Throughout the course, students were invited to rewrite their thesis content in English, including research components (i.e. purpose statement, research questions). Table 1 presents examples illustrating improvements *before* and *after intervention*, showing the differences in meaning construction through language mastery.

Table 1. Examples on students' meaning construction before and after intervention[5]

Before intervention	After intervention
Thesis statement: This article explores **the identity dimension of oil conflict in Iraq** and its impact on Kurdish-Arab relations between 2003 and 2017.	This article **explores the Kurdish national identity dimension during the oil conflict in Iraq** and the impact of this conflict on Kurdish-Arab relations between 2003 and 2017.
Problem statement: **The problem of morality** is present in many philosophical writings of Sartre; however, **he does not give a definition** of that despite the efforts.	**The subject of morality** is present in many philosophical writings of **Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)**. However, **Sartre did not attempt to give a definition** of this concept despite the efforts.

5. For an illustration of the thematic analysis before and after intervention, please see the second table in supplementary materials, Appendix 3.

These examples reflect ways in which students were able to rethink concepts, clarify wording to fit research, and master naturalized language in formulating statements, showing evidence of reconstructing meaning (i.e. *from identity dimension of oil conflict* to *national identity dimension during oil conflict)*.

4.   Discussion and conclusions

This study explored doctoral students' experiences in the DEC and how thinking about their thesis in English (L2) impacted the ways they constructed scientific meaning. As presented in the results, three main components were significant for the students. First, their overall course experience presents a meaningful opportunity to master general English skills as well as to approach their own thesis through different lenses, while improving their scientific skills. Unintendedly, the course has gone a step further in motivating some students to break that sense of loneliness by fostering self-esteem and confidence. Furthermore, collaborative learning stressed out the mediating role of instructors, research tools, and peers operating as a support system influencing their efforts to recreate scientific content in L2. The course also allowed students to become more aware of areas in the research process that they can and cannot control, building a foundation toward writing scientific articles in English. Lastly, being hands-on in re-creating scientific content from French to English offers an insight of how the process allowed students to reconstruct meaning, suggesting the impactful role of L2 in a French university.

Going back to the theory, constructivism recognizes that learning is a social construct and that conceptual schemes are transmitted by means of language. As Vygotsky viewed it, knowledge is a co-constructed process. All seems to imply that the DEC not only impacts and has implications on doctoral candidates' English proficiency, but also in reconstruction of meaning of their own research in French.

To conclude, meaning construction in scientific English (L2) is a process developed through positive course experiences and collaborative learning, and driven by the mediating role of facilitators, peers, and tools. The experience supports students' doctoral process, how they take ownership of their thesis, while positioning themselves as future researchers in an international community. In doing so, reflecting doctoral topics in collaborative interdisciplinary groups in English enriches students' meaning creation.

This research fills in the gap that concerns the literature in English for academic purposes related to a French context and offers a novel ground for meaning

construction in an online course through insights of doctoral students in a French university. Further research could include other universities; we hope future contributions will take lead.

5.   Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all those who participated in the DEC at University Paris 8.

6.   Supplementary materials

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Edited by Naouel Zoghlami, Cédric Brudermann, Cedric Sarré, Muriel Grosbois, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny