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# WHEN THE CULTURE OF LEARNING PLAYS A ROLE IN ACADEMIC ENGLISH WRITING

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## **Abstract**

It is commonly assumed that conceptual knowledge can be separated from where learning and using knowledge take place. Brown, Collins & Duguid (1989: 32) argued that “knowledge is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used.” Without an integral understanding of what knowledge is learned, and how it is learned and used in context, the impact of school and academic culture on students’ formation of knowledge may be overlooked. This study investigates writing knowledge within the context of academic culture by exploring graduate student perceptions of academic English writing in China (N=50) and in Thailand (N=50). A student-centred approach to teaching and learning English for Specific (and Academic) Purposes emerges from the data that reveal global issues in writing across academic cultures. Characterizations and comparisons are made for: (a) native academic culture, (b) academic English writing, (c) strategies for academic English writing, (d) composing for academic purposes, and (e) student metaphors for academic English writing.

## **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, thousands of Asian students have been flowing into English-speaking countries to pursue academic degrees. Numerous research findings (e.g. Gu & Schweissfurth 2006; Hu 2001; Mu & Carrington 2007; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong 2006) disclose that international students have been challenged due to their academic English proficiency. Academic language proficiency and content knowledge define academic proficiency (Krashen & Brown 2007), but many western researchers have centred on international students’ socialization in host country programs and some on plagiarism after they leave the host country (Pecorari 2010). Researchers have been overlooking academic culture as a factor that contributes to the success or hindrance of international students’ academic success (Cheng & Fox 2008) in international graduate programs. Within Asian student populations, for example, nationality and academic culture play crucial roles in language learning and language use (Anugkakul 2011). Where and how multilingual students acquire proficiency (competence) for academic English writing provides context for learning, that is, in the home country situation where non-English-speaking students first learn, develop, and deploy knowledge of academic English writing. Knowledge of academic culture as a backdrop

for learning, teaching, and assessing L2 student writers is essential given that “the activity, context, and culture” in which knowledge is developed and used defines the situated nature of cognition for learners (Brown, Collins & Duguid 1989: 32).

The paucity of research investigating L2 writers as learners across academic cultures provides rationale for investigating graduate student writer perceptions of English academic writing in this study. Since both China and Thailand have their own National English Curriculum, setting the tone for and defining the academic culture of English language teaching (Foley 2005; Hu 2003), it is worth investigating whether L2 English students in these countries have similar or different perceptions of their academic English writing processes and strategies. This social view of asking what English learners think about their L2 academic writing and how they go about it is instrumental for understanding student needs in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and for learning logic and analytical patterns of thought development in the professions. Ramsfield (1997), for example, observed that L2 legal writers’ rhetoric and sequence of thought can make US English readers uncomfortable, while Hyland (2003: 47) explained that “the L2 writer is writing from his or her own familiar culture and the L1 reader is reading from another context”.

Investigating Asian-trained graduate student writers across disciplines helps advance language learning, academic literacy (Braine 2002), and disciplinary literacy when Asian students choose to study in the West. There is no first-year composition training, disciplinary language education, or writing across the curriculum at the two Asian universities studied; teachers must teach to the National English Curriculum. It is worth noting that in Thailand, institutions and instructors can develop their own syllabi and teaching content, but that is not the case with the Chinese context. This study, therefore, has direct implications for (a) educational policy makers in the East, and (b) international program administrators in the West.

### 1.1. *Significance*

This research is timely because of trends and changes associated with English as a *lingua franca* in professional and academic communication and the internationalization of higher education worldwide. International students contributed more than \$21 billion to the US economy in 2011 alone, for example, with the leading place of origin from China<sup>1</sup>. Both educators and researchers (Connor 1996) have raised questions about how to facilitate improvement in international students’ academic English writing. Instructors of (a) English composition at the undergraduate level, and (b) disciplinary writing at the graduate level in the West may focus on ‘usage’ and remedial issues related to native-speaker grammar, or on plagiarism as an ethical issue, rather than on language ‘use’ for advanced academic literacy (Braine 2002). Faculty and program administrators may be unaware of international students’ contrasting views of writing and the writing processes; as a result, international graduate student learning may be assessed unfairly, inaccurately, or lead to tragic ending (e.g. Hu 2003).

<sup>1</sup> Institute of International Education, Inc. 2011 press release on international student enrollment increase. Retrieved December 19, 2011, from <http://www.iae.org/Who-We-Are/News-and-Events/Press-Center/Press-Releases/2011/2011-11-14-Open-Doors-International-Students>.

### 1.2. *Purpose*

This is a descriptive study exploring how academic writing in English is perceived by graduate students in various disciplines in China (N=50) and in Thailand (N=50). The research purpose is to disclose global issues related to writing and academic literacy (Braine 2002), with a view to advancing writing proficiency as students prepare for disciplinary discourse within and beyond the academy in this age of globalization. Understanding how students are grounded in language and literacy contributes to an empowering curriculum and writing pedagogy that is “process-oriented, autonomous, and experiential” (Canagarajah 2006: 15) for teachers and for students. Five questions related to research purpose guided this study. They are listed as follows.

#### Research Questions

1. What are graduate writers’ perceptions of native academic culture?
2. What are graduate writers’ perceptions of academic English writing?
3. What are graduate writers’ perceptions of strategies for academic English writing?
4. What are graduate writers’ perceptions of composing for academic purposes?
5. What are graduate writers’ metaphors for academic English writing?

### 1.3. *Limitations*

Four limitations apply to this study. First, any type of self-report is subject to the limitations of the individual reporting. Second, Thai students were given a Thai language version of the questionnaire, while Chinese students were given the English version. Our Thai colleague deemed the native language version easier for Thai participants to understand. Third, the China study used a homogeneous group of law majors whereas the Thai study included many majors. This variation could have affected the results but it probably did not severely limit the study given that discipline as a dynamic level of teaching context was not a factor; teachers in these countries do not have the power to influence the national academic curriculum for English – the academic cultural context for our research methodology. Fourth, the relatively small sample size of graduate student participants [N=100] means that generalizations can only be made with caution and not to culture at large.

## 2. **Methodology**

### 2.1. *Design of the study*

Through a quantitative approach, the study explores key issues in writing that influence academic writing literacy for Chinese and Thai graduate students. All participants had to meet the same academic language requirement, that is, an abstract in English for their graduate research. The plan was to collect, analyse and report on questionnaire data by country, and then to compare results. Researchers had direct access to student participants through colleagues in each country.

### 2.1.1. Procedure

The study took place at one sitting lasting approximately 30 minutes. Participants in each country volunteered to complete one questionnaire in their English class or in their leisure time through research colleagues. The *Academic English Writing Questionnaire* allowed graduate student writers to reflect on their academic culture and to identify actions intentionally employed (strategies) for writing academic English assignments and papers. All questionnaire items included definitions, and research colleagues did not interpret questionnaire items or definitions for research participants.

## 2.2. Participants

As previously mentioned, graduate student writers from two academic cultures, in homogeneous and heterogeneous discipline groups from two universities, were recruited through colleagues in China and in Thailand. Chinese participants were law students from East coast China. Thai participants were mixed majors from a national university (not the teacher-training system) in lower northern Thailand. The data provided by participants were grouped for reporting and presentation, and participants' names and universities have not been used.

### 2.2.1. Specific characteristics

The 50 participants from each country are currently engaged in academic English writing. They were all volunteers, their native academic language is not English, and they all have to complete their graduate studies by writing a non-discipline-specific summary (abstract) for their research in L2 academic English. The role of the teacher is to try to have their students pass the graduation requirement for English.

## 2.3. Why the selection was made

Asian graduate students writing L2 academic English in their home countries were chosen because little research has focused on this population to date, especially at advanced levels of academic literacy and language proficiency. This research may eventually support the hypothesis that literacy skills and learning strategies transfer, positively or negatively, across academic cultures and languages. The research population is unique because it allows for comparison across academic cultures of learning, with national English curricula determining cultural context for the study.

## 2.4. Research participants (N=100)

### 2.4.1. Description of Thai participants (N=50)

There are 18 males and 32 females in Thailand for our study. The youngest is 23 years old and the oldest is 52. Their majors as graduate students are Educational Research and Evaluation, Social Development, Communication Management, Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Administration, and Art Education. Master's degree students study for two years and doctoral degree students study for four years. Both have to write abstracts for their theses or dissertations. The term 'abstract' for

both the Thai and Chinese student participants means ‘summary’ of an academic research paper.

#### 2.4.1.1. *National learning/writing context of Thai students*

Similar to China, Thailand has a national curriculum for English language teaching. English education is viewed as compulsory. Students in higher education are required to take 12 credits for English courses: six in general English and the other six in ESP (Foley 2005). The emphasis on taking ESP courses in Thailand is stronger than that in China, which has only one ESP course that teaches English abstracts for academic papers. It is important to point out that the field of ESP includes English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

The courses that the participants of the current study were required to take at the undergraduate level are Foundations of English I, II, III and Professional English. At the Master’s degree level, they were required to take English for Master Level Studies, and at the doctoral level, English for Graduate Studies I, English for Graduate Studies II, English for Graduate Studies III, and Oral Academic Presentation.

#### 2.4.2. *Description of Chinese participants (N=50)*

Twenty males and thirty females in China participated in our study. The youngest is 24 years old and the oldest is 33. The duration of the course for law students is three years. These native Mandarin-speaking participants were in the middle of their programs when the researchers collected the data. Subjects will be graduating in one and a half year’s time. Their required English writing centres on abstracts (summaries) of their publications that include journal articles and theses. The requirements for student writing of abstracts mandate that: (a) sentences are properly written; (b) meanings are clearly expressed; (c) technical terms are well worded; (d) the abstract as a whole is standard and well organized; and (e) key words chosen are accurate.

#### 2.4.2.1. *National learning/writing context of Chinese students*

There has been a massive state drive in China since the 1970s to introduce English language teaching to students in grades three and up in elementary schools. In addition to including English as a subject in high school and college entrance examinations, all college students are required to pass the national College English Test (CET) Band 4 for undergraduate graduation and Band 6 for graduate studies admissions. To pass CET Band 4, all college students must take English language courses related to reading, speaking, and listening to the English language for communicative purposes. Writing is not emphasized, but vocabulary learning is. At the graduate studies level, Chinese students are required to be able to write English abstracts for their academic papers in a thesis writing class, that is, an academic writing class for Chinese students in which western-style academic English writing is not the focus. At the undergraduate level, the English course required by the Chinese participants was Intensive Reading I. At the graduate Master’s degree level, the required courses were Intensive Reading II, Writing for General Purposes and Academic Purposes, and Translation.

## 2.5. Instrumentation

### 2.5.1. Description of the questionnaire

The *Academic English Writing Questionnaire* is a 50-item survey instrument designed specifically for this study. It is comprised of 48 closed items and two open-ended items. It evolved from a 100-item *Preliminary Writing Strategies Questionnaire* that was adapted for the first author's dissertation research with permission from Mu & Carrington (2007) in Australia. Dissertation results contributed to the selection of items in the current *Academic English Writing Questionnaire* (Appendix A). Items were selected that helped research participants make a shift from writer-centred drafting to reader-centred communication. Through summary, synthesis, paraphrase and analysis, research participants 'composed' by (a) telling and retelling what was in the research literature in the drafting phase, and (b) transforming the rough, learner-centred draft into reader-centred communication in the revising stage – with sentence units forming a unique, cohesive, and coherent language structure – thereby solving the information-transfer problem for both the research writer and for the writer's intended audience (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987; Grabe & Kaplan 1996).

Both pre-writing questionnaires have been useful tools for discussing global issues in writing and research relevant to ESP and EAP classroom practice in Australia and the US, creating common ground for international student writers studying at the graduate level in these academic English cultures. Such questionnaires perform the function of needs analysis in ESP and EAP by (a) helping linguistically and culturally diverse class members discover what is appropriate and conventional when writing in their native academic language, and (b) disclosing contrasting cultural ideas about academic writing and language use. In sum, the concise, new, reliable questionnaire developed for this study was intended to discern perceptions among graduate student writers across academic cultures in a second academic language, with a view to enhance critical thinking in academic writing and advance language use when writing research from printed and electronic sources.

## 2.6. Validity and reliability

For content validity, we consulted with a variety of teachers, the research literature, and target group members for relevance, representativeness, and exactness of wording. A validity check with our Thai and Chinese colleagues disclosed "no objections" about questions or results (personal communication, 13 December 2011).

After data collection, we used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 19.0 to analyse the reliability of the questionnaire. For Thailand, Cronbach's Alpha was .885, indicating that the questionnaire was very reliable. For China, Cronbach's Alpha was .544, indicating that the questionnaire was moderately reliable. The difference between the two is because we used a homogeneous group of Chinese subjects: law majors who used the original English version of the questionnaire in contrast to a heterogeneous group of Thai subjects from a sampling of majors who used a native-language (Thai) translation of the questionnaire.

### 3. Data analysis and results

#### 3.1. Graduate writers' perceptions of native academic culture

The first research question had to do with graduate writers' perceptions of native academic culture. Statements Nos. 1 to 12 from the *Academic English Writing Questionnaire* are used to answer Research Question 1. All students' answers were tallied in a table for each group (Appendix B). Most (50% or higher) student participants chose "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the Statements 1-12. These statements describe native academic culture according to participants living and studying in China and in Thailand. Student perceptions of native academic culture provide context for academic writing and instruction in ESP and EAP.

##### 3.1.1. Topics for discussion: Research Question 1

Academic writing, from the viewpoints of both groups, involves stating knowledge (knowledge telling) and deepening the level of understanding to include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of research (knowledge transforming). Furthermore, the idea that academic writers borrow other writers' ideas "randomly", because knowledge is the common property of human beings and not personal intellectual property, is not overwhelmingly supported by either group of participants. Statement 8 may need further exploration as to what students think about textual borrowing and what they do in a specific academic writing task. All (100%) Thai respondents and most (64%) Chinese respondents agree or strongly agree that good academic writers in their native cultures refer to authoritative sources in their writing (Statement 10), but how they use these sources may differ.

Statement 9 suggests variability between the two groups of participants. Percentages show that the Thai academic writers may prefer to let readers infer the meaning of their writing, whereas the Chinese academic writers may prefer to express their meaning more directly or explicitly to let the reader know what they are thinking. Statement 9 may need further exploration to know more about what students think about writer-reader responsibility in a specific academic writing task.

#### 3.2. Graduate writers' perceptions of academic English writing

The second research question has to do with graduate writers' perceptions of academic English writing. Statements 13-16 and 44-45 are used to answer Research Question 2. All students' answers were tallied in a table for each group (Appendix C). These statements describe academic English writing by Chinese and by Thai participants. Most (72% or higher) Chinese participants and most (66% or higher) Thai participants agree or strongly agree with all the statements. Because perceptions of academic English writing link academic culture with academic writing instruction, a close comparison was made for each statement.

##### 3.2.1. Topics for discussion: Research Question 2

No Thai participants and fewer than 10 per cent of Chinese participants disagree that (a) English is important for their studies, career or profession, or that (b) effective

and efficient academic writing in English involves conscious use of strategies: conscious, goal-directed actions academic English writers may take more than once while writing. However, percentages for Statement 16 suggest that not all have learned how to write using authority from printed (and electronic) sources, even though 80-90% of participants agree that academic writing in English involves learning from source text as well as communicating what is learned to highly educated readers (Statement 15).

### 3.3. *Graduate writers' perceptions of strategies for academic English writing*

The third research question has to do with graduate writers' perceptions of strategies for academic English writing. Statements 17-39 are used to answer Research Question 3. All students' answers were tallied in a table for each group (Appendix D). These statements describe strategies for writing by Thai and Chinese participants that are conscious, goal-directed, and taken more than once while writing.

As in previous responses, the Thai participants were less likely than the Chinese to disagree with any statement. Furthermore, responses to these statements showed more variation between the two groups of participants. Because perceptions of academic English writing associate with strategies for both the Chinese and Thai participant group, comparisons for each statement were made. Also, because of the number of strategies explored, topics for discussion are organized in four thematic groups as follows: (a) Statements 17-23 centre on process, (b) Statements 24-28 centre on social interaction, (c) Statements 29-34 centre on language use, and (d) Statements 35-39 centre on writing from sources.

#### 3.3.1. *Topics for discussion: Research Question 3, Statements 17-23 focusing on process*

Survey responses to Statement 19 suggest that the Chinese participants are less likely than the Thai participants to delay editing. On the other hand, the Chinese participants may be more willing to revise ideas than the Thai participants according to the survey responses for Statement 23. Both revising and editing are viewed in the writing research literature as components of the composing process.

#### 3.3.2. *Topics for discussion: Research Question 3, Statements 24-28 focusing on social interaction*

Survey responses to Statements 24-28 suggest that the Thai academic writers employ social interaction more than the Chinese academic writers do. In addition to what can be seen as a strategy for delaying editing, social strategies are important for Thai student respondents to communicate effectively with professors and classmates and to refine ideas.

#### 3.3.3. *Topics for discussion: Research Question 3, Statements 29-34 focusing on language use*

Students' responses were more or less equally divided across categories for Statements 29-31. These had to do mostly with language use and revising. Close



comparison shows that the Thai participants re-use language from source text (Statement 29) more than the Chinese participants, and the Thai participants correct language-related issues (Statement 30) only after revising ideas, in contrast to the Chinese participants. Furthermore, the Chinese participants seem more likely than the Thai participants to take the time needed to have an objective perspective of their own writing (Statement 32).

#### *3.3.4. Topics for discussion: Research Question 3, Statements 35-39 focusing on writing from sources*

Although the Thai and Chinese participants agree about paraphrase, synthesis, and analysis, the survey responses suggest a more strategic use of summary by Chinese participants. Most (58%) Chinese participants disagree that they summarize information in English simply by reducing the source text, whereas most Thai participants (78%) agree. The Chinese participants seem more likely to summarize information in English in a complex way by selecting and reorganizing the source text (Statement 37). In other words, they may engage in knowledge-transforming more than in knowledge-telling from the source text.

#### *3.4. Graduate writers' perceptions of composing for academic purposes*

The fourth research question has to do with graduate student writer perceptions of composing for academic purposes. Statements 40-43 are used to answer Research Question 4. All students' answers were tallied in a table for each group (Appendix E). These statements describe composing levels and purposes based on Grabe (2001).

Most (60-68%) Chinese and most (54-86%) Thai student participants chose "Agree" or "Strongly agree" to all statements related to academic English composition and levels of composing. Disagreement was 8% or less among the Thai and 20% or less among the Chinese participants. Comparisons were made to answer Research Question 4.

##### *3.4.1. Topics for discussion: Research Question 4*

Most (86%) Thai respondents write to understand, remember, summarize simply, or extend notes in English (Statement 41) in contrast to Chinese respondents, 62% of whom agree or strongly agree that they do this, and 20% of whom disagree that they do this. Similarly, 54% of Thai respondents and 62% of Chinese respondents agree or strongly agree that they write to state knowledge in English by listing, repeating, or paraphrasing the source text (Statement 40), whereas 20% of Chinese respondents disagree or strongly disagree that they do this. Paraphrasing may be an academic language skill that needs more attention in the research literature. Both statements relate to knowledge telling when composing for academic purposes.

Statements 42-43 describe higher levels or purposes for academic writing. Both Thai (64%) and Chinese (68%) respondents agree or strongly agree that they write to learn, problem-solve, summarize in a complex way, or synthesize information in English. Similarly, both Thai (56%) and Chinese (60%) respondents agree or strongly agree that they write to critique, persuade, or interpret evidence selectively and appropriately in English. Both statements relate to knowledge transforming, with

percentages suggesting that more attention may need to be given to these composing levels and purposes for writing.

### 3.5. Graduate writers' metaphors for academic English writing

Statements from 46-50 are used to answer Research Question 5. All students' answers were tallied in a table for each group (Appendix F). These statements had to do with graduate student metaphors for academic English writing and the possible influence of strategies and culture. Comparisons were made for each statement relating to the closed- and open-ended questions that answer Research Question 5.

#### 3.5.1. Topics for discussion: Research Question 5

Most (72% Thai and 56% Chinese) participants agree that they are like architects when they write in English: that is, they plan, draft, and then edit their own work (Statement 46). Similarly, most (58% Thai and 55% Chinese) agree that they are like artists when they write in English because they re-work and revise their writing as they go along, rather than follow a strict plan or outline (Statement 48). These two sets of percentages suggest a possible overlap between the technical and creative aspects of composing in English for student participants. Only 40% of the Chinese agree that they slowly build and correct their language use as they write, in contrast to the Thai (58%) who seem to prefer this approach to writing in English (Statement 47).

It is interesting to note that, in contrast to the Chinese participants (N=50), most Thai participants did not answer the open-ended questions (#49 and #50). Only seven out of fifty responded to Statement # 49, and six out of fifty responded to Statement #50. This omission may have something to do with academic culture, proficiency in writing, or both.

*Statement 49.* Words or comparisons that the Chinese participants use to describe themselves as academic writers fall into four general categories: see Table 1 below.

<b>Creative</b> (and technical)	<b>Organic</b> (and dynamic)	<b>Technical</b> (and creative)	<b>Other: adjectives/phrases</b>
painter x2	gardener x5	archeologist x2	inspiration and logical
poet	like a learner x2	editor	careful x2
collector poet	like a farmer	partner	difficult to describe
drawer	like a cook	challenger	like x2
writer		engineer	good!
composer		teacher	not very good
inspiration creator		historian	responsibility
melodist		English learner	need to be enhanced
creative		explorer	partner
need creation and wisdom		scientist	necessary to improve
		sports player	conscientious
		strict x2	hard working
			it's a challenge
			challenger

**Table 1.** Words or comparisons describing Chinese academic writers

*Statement 50.* Similarly, words or comparisons describing the process of writing in academic English for Chinese participants fall into four categories: see Table 2 below.

Hard	Difficult but...	Gradual, organic	Plan and write
difficult x9	difficult but profitable	gradual process x2	systematic
complicated x2	hard but benefit	relaxed and work hard	we need to do it systematically
difficult & complex	hard process but enjoy it	not very strict outline	design, produce, and examine the quality
difficult & boring	it's very hard for us to describe something precisely	like planting a tree	scientist
collision of thoughts, reconstruct, innovate	[must] concentrate on	phrase a note...and compose a piece of music	must have and follow a blueprint but modify to improve it
must work hard so that I can harvest		I decide what to write then organize my material and language	I have a plan before writing but when I really begin to write, I need to work hard at that very time to enrich my content
			I plan draft and write and then I can get something from it

**Table 2.** Words or comparisons describing the process of writing in academic English for Chinese participants

In contrast to the Chinese, the Thai participants did not necessarily discern between words or comparisons that describe themselves as academic writers and those that describe the process of writing in academic English. As a result, some new categories emerged from the data: see Table 3 below.

Difficult	Consider/ collect and write	Understanding (of) process	Patterned	Transform into English
I am a handicap in academic english writing.	I consider the main points and then I explain.	English writing process is not systematic.	Try to follow a prototype	I imagine in Thai then summarize into English.
I am like a beginner. I still need more learn.	Have to collect content about the story.	English writing process I have to understand.	I write in accordance with Thai pattern.	I write in Thai first and then I transform...
Academic english writing is really difficult.		My academic English writing is like a laborer.		

**Table 3.** Words or comparisons Thai participants used to describe themselves as writers and the process of writing in academic English

### 3.5.2. Topics for discussion: Research Question 5

Although academic writing in English can be difficult for both Thai and Chinese student participants, the data underscore the importance of being systematic in the process. Both populations could benefit from knowledge of social/affective strategies that lessen anxiety and increase self-efficacy and motivation, such as interacting with teachers or peers to assist learning.

#### 4. Discussion of results

The exploration of Thai and Chinese student perceptions and interpretations of academic English writing in this study opens a window into the socio-cultural experiences of graduate student EAP writers. Results for Research Question 1 disclose differing assumptions and expectations about who is primarily responsible for successful communication in an academic culture – the reader or the writer. Explicitness and directness appear to be socio-cultural elements of academic style for the Chinese participants, whereas the Thai participants may let readers infer the meaning of their writing. Although rhetorical preferences and style vary from culture to culture and from language to language, they may be influenced by the academic English curriculum and writing instruction as well, creating a shift in reader-writer responsibility as for native Mandarin student participants.

Results for Research Question 2 suggest that teaching students (a) how to write using authority from printed and electronic sources, and (b) how to make the shift from writer-centred learning to reader-centred communication may be desirable. An underlying cultural assumption is whether academic writing is assumed to be the writer's own view or opinion and the kind of support expected for the writer's ideas or arguments. Ownership of text and ideas is a key issue in writing that may contrast culturally, as is reader versus writer responsibility (Hinds 1987).

Results for Research Question 3 suggest that revising and editing – key components of the composing process engaged in differently by participants – may be strategically taught and learned. Revising may be defined as “the stage of the writing process in which one considers and improves the meaning and underlying structure of a draft” (Fowler & Aaron 2001: 963). Editing is a “distinct step in revising a written work, focusing on clarity, tone, and correctness” (*ibid.*: 951). Being strategic in delaying the editing process (Elbow 1973) may be helpful at lower levels of academic English writing proficiency. Planning for language use, however, has been associated with metacognition, “a key factor in self-directed, autonomous learning at all levels” (Ehrman 2002: 252).

Added to these are social strategies, which are found to be important for the Thai academic English writers in this study, suggesting a possible difference between student versus teacher roles in the Thai and Chinese academic cultures and curricula. Strategies for language use, such as taking the time needed to have an objective perspective of one's own writing, were found important for the Chinese participants. Critically reflecting on one's writing as well as analysing and integrating comments made by peers and teachers are high-level cognitive skills and strategies, useful for language learning and writing from source texts. Such processes may assist with knowledge-transforming or rewriting from one's own point of view.

Competence-related constructs for composing that relate to knowledge-transforming and knowledge-telling are discerned by results for Research Question 4. The composing levels relate to writing purpose and increasing processing demands (Grabe 2001). Embedded in these are summary, paraphrase, and synthesis that help develop L2 academic writers' purpose and knowledge for writing. Whether used as (unconscious) skills or (conscious) strategies, they are central to higher-order thinking

and academic language use when writing from sources, known in the research literature as discourse synthesis – a common but cognitively demanding academic literacy task requiring students to select, organize, and connect content from source texts as they compose their own texts (Segev-Miller: 2004).

Research Question 5 results for both closed and open-ended items highlight the importance of a systematic approach for teaching and learning academic writing and for understanding writing as a recursive process. Writing as processes for planning, drafting and revising can be added to the curriculum through “explicit strategies’ instruction” (Oxford 2011), for example. A strategic approach could include using pre-established rhetorical models and modifying existing structures, as suggested by the data. Revising and rhetorical structure are other key issues in writing that may vary across academic cultures, disciplines, and genres.

## **5. Conclusion: Why academic English writing research across cultures?**

The academic culture of teaching and learning makes a difference for participants, as does the national English curriculum. Research results reveal that graduate student writers situated in Chinese academic culture and in Thai academic culture perceive academic English writing differently. The terms “learning cultures” (Kennedy 2002) and “small cultures” (Holliday 1999; Oxford 2002) refer to particular learning environments and the beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviours in these environments that may contrast culturally. Staff and faculty in intensive language and support programs in English-speaking universities, therefore, need to be aware of international students’ academic cultures of origin because such an awareness enhances (a) “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay 2000), and (b) the ethical treatment of students in terms of teaching, learning, and assessment (pedagogy).

Berating non-western style academic writing with threats of plagiarism, focusing on surface issues of grammar (akin to accent), or ignoring the teaching/learning situation of international students altogether does not help students think, write, or learn better in English. A strategy-based, problem-solving approach works for international student writers whose cultures of learning may differ from those in English-speaking countries. Responsible approaches invite L2 academic English writers to (a) compare and contrast academic writing conventions, and (b) reflect on aspects of writing acceptable in the academic culture of origin but unacceptable in the target academic culture. The questionnaire developed for this study facilitates this kind of reflection for students and needs analysis for teachers (West 1994). Writing teachers should become familiar with global issues related to writing that affect international student approaches to writing. These issues include the roles of research and inquiry, writer versus reader responsibility, the roles of revising and editing, student versus teacher roles, values of individualism versus collectivism, and ownership of text and ideas<sup>2</sup>. These are issues

<sup>2</sup> See the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers (2009).

in writing that exist in academic cultural contexts and relate to western notions of plagiarism and intellectual property.

Our research results across academic cultures help make these writing issues visible for university administrators, teachers, and international students transitioning from writing abstracts in their home countries to graduate-level research and writing in professional programs in English-speaking host countries. According to Oates & Enquist (2009: 283): “Most ESL law students report that their foreign language classes concentrated only on vocabulary and sentence grammar; they stopped short of addressing the larger cultural issues that affect the overall approach to writing” – a socio-cultural gap dealt with in this ESP research across cultures.

### 5.1. *When presented with a student writer from another country, what do I do?*

Global issues in writing are revealed when teachers use the *Academic English Writing Questionnaire* (Appendix A) for student reflection and classroom discussion in a course or workshop. Cultural contrasts will emerge, allowing the teacher/facilitator to discern the influence of academic culture and background learning, providing opportunities to address expectations of the target academic culture. Teachers can compare students’ survey responses to students’ professional profiles and language learning history to tailor course syllabi to meet students’ needs as well as program requirements. Teachers can very quickly understand who their students are as writers and what skills student writers bring with them from their home countries. This kind of research-based pedagogy discloses the impact of academic culture on students’ formation of writing knowledge – the basis for intellectual growth and development in a professional program or graduate field of study. In sum, transitioning to a more professional program with a more rigorous level of expectation regarding performance in language use and in composition means (a) comprehensible input for learners within the context of academic culture, and (b) strategies for problem-solving in academic English writing that help develop language and academic proficiency (Krashen 2011).

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## Appendix A

Native academic language \_\_\_\_\_ Country of origin \_\_\_\_\_ Code  
name/number \_\_\_\_\_

### Academic English Writing Questionnaire

*The purpose of this survey is find out what YOU think about academic English writing for graduate school. There are no right or wrong answers. So, please answer the questions based on what you really think. Your answers will be kept confidential and will not affect anyone's opinion of you.*

#### Directions

In this questionnaire, you will find statements describing academic writers and the process of writing an academic English assignment or paper. Indicate HOW WELL EACH STATEMENT DESCRIBES YOU by writing a number beside each statement according to the following scale:

- 1- I strongly **disagree**
- 2- I disagree
- 3- I neither agree nor disagree
- 4- I agree
- 5- I strongly **agree**.

- \_\_\_ 1. Different cultures and disciplines have different kinds of texts and writing styles.
- \_\_\_ 2. Standards for what is considered good academic writing are established by culture.
- \_\_\_ 3. Writing well in my native language is very important in my native academic culture.
- \_\_\_ 4. Academic writing in my native culture is *knowledge telling* or stating knowledge.
- \_\_\_ 5. Academic writing in my native culture is *knowledge transforming* or deepening the level of understanding to include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of research.
- \_\_\_ 6. Revising is a very important stage of writing in my native academic culture.
- \_\_\_ 7. Academic writers in my native culture need a controlling idea for writing.
- \_\_\_ 8. Academic writers in my native culture borrow other writers' ideas randomly because knowledge is the common property of human beings, not personal intellectual property.
- \_\_\_ 9. Academic writers in my native culture let readers infer the meaning of their writing rather than express their meaning directly or explicitly.
- \_\_\_ 10. Good academic writers in my native culture refer to authoritative sources in their writing.
- \_\_\_ 11. Good academic writing in my native culture means working hard for clear meaning.
- \_\_\_ 12. Academic writing in any culture is a socialization process because to do it well, one must learn from others.
- \_\_\_ 13. Academic writing in English involves a different process from writing in my native academic language.
- \_\_\_ 14. Effective and efficient academic writing in English involves conscious use of strategies.
- \_\_\_ 15. Academic writing in English is a complex process because it involves learning from source text as well as communicating what I learned to a highly educated reader.
- \_\_\_ 16. I have been taught how to write using authority from printed (and electronic) sources.
- \_\_\_ 17. I always consider my purpose, audience, and level of formality for writing.
- \_\_\_ 18. As I write in English, I concentrate on both the content and on the language.
- \_\_\_ 19. I prefer to concentrate on the content first, before concentrating on my language use.
- \_\_\_ 20. My sentences are not too long or complex so they can be immediately understood.
- \_\_\_ 21. When I revise, I pay attention to how ideas are connected in my sentences, in my paragraphs, and in the sections of my writing assignment or paper.
- \_\_\_ 22. I like to have criteria for assessing the quality of my writing in stages: that is, pre-writing, drafting, and revising.
- \_\_\_ 23. I like to follow my original plans without revising them.
- \_\_\_ 24. When I do not understand an academic writing assignment, I ask the professor for clarification.

- \_\_\_ 25. Sometimes I ask my classmates to clarify the writing task for me.
- \_\_\_ 26. I generate ideas by thinking about what I have written and by making associations.
- \_\_\_ 27. I refine my ideas by interacting with people at different stages of my writing.
- \_\_\_ 28. I improve my English academic writing by speaking about my work to others.
- \_\_\_ 29. I re-use language from source text in English academic writing.
- \_\_\_ 30. My first draft is usually close to my final one.
- \_\_\_ 31. I correct language-related issues only after revising my ideas.
- \_\_\_ 32. When revising a paper, I leave it for several days to have an objective perspective of my own writing.
- \_\_\_ 33. When revising, I examine each idea again and see how it is developed within each paragraph or paragraph block (section).
- \_\_\_ 34. I consider various ways of organizing ideas, depending on my purpose, such as comparison and contrast, cause-effect, problem and solution, pros and cons.
- \_\_\_ 35. I paraphrase information in English by putting source material into my own words.
- \_\_\_ 36. I summarize information in English simply by reducing source text.
- \_\_\_ 37. I summarize information in English complexly by selecting and reorganizing source text.
- \_\_\_ 38. I synthesize information in English by combining and connecting source text.
- \_\_\_ 39. I analyze information in English by reflecting and breaking down source text into its parts.
- \_\_\_ 40. I write to state knowledge in English by listing, repeating, or paraphrasing source text.
- \_\_\_ 41. I write to understand, remember, summarize simply, or extend notes in English to myself.
- \_\_\_ 42. I write to learn, problem-solve, summarize complexly, or synthesize information in English.
- \_\_\_ 43. I write to critique, persuade, or interpret evidence selectively and appropriately in English.
- \_\_\_ 44. Writing well in English is important for my studies in graduate school.
- \_\_\_ 45. Writing well in English is important for my career or profession.
- \_\_\_ 46. I am like an *architect* when I write in English because I plan, draft, and then edit my own work.
- \_\_\_ 47. I am like a *laborer* when I write in English because I slowly build and correct my language as I write.
- \_\_\_ 48. I am like an *artist* when I write in English because I re-work and revise my writing as I go along rather than follow a strict plan or outline.
- \_\_\_ 49. Another word or comparison that describes me as an academic writer is:
- 
- \_\_\_ 50. Another word or comparison that describes the process of writing in academic English is:
- 

## Appendix B

Graduate writers' perceptions of native academic culture										
Item	Thai					China				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1		4%	6%	60%	30%		14%	2%	50%	34%
2	2%		22%	64%	12%		20%	14%	54%	12%
3			4%	44%	52%	4%	4%	8%	44%	40%
4		2%	2%	56%	40%	2%	26%	20%	42%	10%
5			6%	64%	30%		2%	4%	64%	30%
6		2%	18%	48%	32%		2%	8%	66%	24%
7			6%	68%	26%	4%	12%	12%	56%	16%
8		2%	18%	34%	38%	8%	20%	26%	34%	12%
9	2%	6%	20%	62%	10%	2%	48%	18%	24%	8%
10				22%	78%		20%	16%	54%	10%
11	2%	4%	16%	32%	46%		22%	20%	46%	12%
12			8%	62%	30%		8%	14%	48%	30%

## Appendix C

Graduate writers' perceptions of academic English writing										
Item	Thai					China				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
13		2%	22%	46%	30%		22%	6%	66%	6%
14			30%	60%	10%		8%	16%	48%	28%
15	2%	8%	10%	50%	30%			10%	62%	28%
16		10%	24%	48%	18%	2%	22%	6%	64%	6%
44			4%	56%	40%		2%	18%	42%	38%
45			14%	50%	36%		8%	14%	38%	40%

## Appendix D

Graduate writers' perceptions of strategies for academic English writing										
Item	Thai					China				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
17			10%	60%	30%	2%	22%	14%	58%	4%
18			10%	58%	32%		8%	4%	64%	24%
19	2%		16%	50%	32%		22%	14%	54%	10%
20		2%	4%	60%	34%		26%	18%	48%	8%
21			8%	70%	22%		8%	4%	70%	18%
22		2%	14%	70%	14%		12%	22%	50%	16%
23	12%	30%	34%	12%	12%	8%	68%	12%	8%	4%
24			4%	64%	32%	2%	20%	6%	56%	16%
25			6%	60%	34%	2%	22%	16%	56%	4%
26		2%	6%	74%	18%		2%	18%	80%	
27		4%	12%	70%	14%		28%	18%	42%	12%
28		4%	22%	58%	16%	2%	36%	30%	26%	6%
29		6%	20%	60%	14%	4%	16%	36%	40%	4%
30	4%	10%	30%	48%	8%	6%	34%	22%	30%	8%
31			8%	70%	22%	4%	42%	8%	40%	6%
32	4%	12%	36%	36%	12%		28%	8%	52%	12%
33		2%	14%	70%	14%	2%	4%	10%	70%	14%
34			14%	60%	26%	2%		14%	62%	22%
35	2%	10%	18%	54%	16%		22%	10%	54%	14%
36		8%	14%	60%	18%		58%	22%	20%	
37		16%	30%	44%	10%		14%	20%	60%	6%
38		4%	22%	60%	14%		10%	18%	70%	2%
39		8%	18%	58%	16%		22%	24%	54%	

### Appendix E

<b>Graduate writers' perceptions of composing for academic purposes</b>										
Item	Thai					China				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
40		4%	42%	50%	4%	2%	18%	18%	60%	2%
41		2%	12%	72%	14%		20%	18%	52%	10%
42		4%	32%	58%	6%		14%	18%	62%	6%
43		8%	36%	50%	6%		18%	22%	50%	10%

### Appendix F

<b>Graduate writers' metaphors for academic English writing</b>										
Item	Thai					China				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
46		2%	26%	52%	20%		16%	28%	44%	12%
47		8%	8%	26%	36%	2%	28%	30%	32%	8%
48		2%	6%	34%	40%	4.1%	20.4%	20.4	44.9%	10.2%