Academic Writing Practices of Chinese ESL Students in Australia: A Textography

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Background

- Students academic writing as a skill vs. as a situated social practice
- Previous literature on academic writing are often 'snapshots' of single moment of learners’ performance
Students always ask

How to be analytical and critical in academic writing? Why?

Aim of the study

To investigate academic writing practices of Asian ESL (English as second language) graduate students in Australia during one year period.

Employment of outside sources
Research focuses

- To examine how they employ other resources in developing their own texts
- To identify developmental features in their writing
- To consider these practices and features in relation to their sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds
Research method – textography

- A mix-up of an ethnography to make visible the beliefs and practices of members of a culture or community and a textual analysis to make visible the salient features of texts under investigation.
- This approach focuses on the forms and formation of the written texts themselves as produced by members of the community under investigation, through an exploration of their contextually embedded discursive practices (Swales 1998).

Basic assumption of their development in academic writing

Descriptive patch writing with few evidence of academic criticism and representation of self voice

Analytical writing with more evidences of academic criticism and representation of self voice
Data collection

12 coursework master level students, newly arrived from China. Each student will

- Submit 4 essay assignments at different stage of their study for detailed textual analysis
- Take 4 semi-structured interview to provide ethnographic data including
  - background information
  - attitude towards learning
  - thinking aloud about the writing
  - strategies adopted to cope with outside sources

General information of the 12 students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>IELTS average / writing</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>7.5/7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED (TESOL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED (TESOL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>7/6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED (TESOL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MPA (Accounting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MC (Commerce)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED (TESOL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED (TESOL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>7.5/7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED (Language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S9</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED (TESOL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S11</td>
<td>(TOEFL)260/4.5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED (TESOL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S12</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MED (TESOL)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. **Intertextual analysis**
   - Intertextual representation, examining how writers include outside sources in a text;
   - Source type, exploring what type of sources writers use;
   - Source function, investigating what writers use outside sources for;
   - Endorsement, considering how the writers position themselves as writers in relation to outside sources.

2. **Analysis of metadiscourse**
   - Metadiscourse is the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community (Hyland, 2005:37).
   - More frequencies of metadiscourse may be found in the process of development.

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### An interpersonal model of metadiscourse (Hyland 2005:49)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Help to guide the reader through the text</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>Express relations between main clauses</td>
<td>In addition; but; thus; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame markers</td>
<td>Refer to discourse acts; sequences or stages</td>
<td>Finally, to conclude, my purpose is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endophoric markers</td>
<td>Refer to information in other parts of the text</td>
<td>Noted above; see Fig. in section 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidentials</td>
<td>Refer to information from other texts</td>
<td>According to X; Z states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code glosses</td>
<td>Elaborate propositional meanings</td>
<td>Namely; e.g.; such as; in other words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactional</strong></td>
<td>Involve the reader in the text</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>Withhold commitment and open dialogue</td>
<td>Might; perhaps; possible; about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>Emphasize certainty or close dialogue</td>
<td>In fact; definitely; it is clear that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude markers</td>
<td>Express writer’s attitude to proposition</td>
<td>Unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self mentions</td>
<td>Explicit reference to author</td>
<td>I; we; my; me; our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement markers</td>
<td>Explicitly build relationship with reader</td>
<td>Consider; note; you can see that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Case 1
Some background information

- A MED TESOL program student,
- newly arrived from China, with IELTS 6.5/writing 6
- 1st assignment after she arrived in Sydney for 2 and half months
- The task requires them to evaluate the general treatment of grammar in ELT textbooks

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Excerpt 1

No one has ever doubted the crucial position of grammar in education in historical tradition for time being (Mulroy, 2003, p. 60). However, as the development of a variety of approaches to language teaching, it becomes more blur about the grammar place in the language classroom (Nunan, 1991, p. 143). It is of much freedom for language teachers to set their own methodology in grammar teaching. Since the form and function in language interact with each other in close relationship (Johns, 1994, p. 294), either “formal grammar” or “functional grammar” can be focused in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 34). As for the passive voice teaching, the present writer would prefer a function-focused input in the grammar class. But in which approach can the passive voice be taught effectively to the intermediate learners? According to current approaches to grammar teaching, task-based instruction is an ideal option for the passive construction teaching. As the task-based approach is composed of three phases in Rod Ellis (2003, cited in Nassaji & Fotos, 2004, p. 135), each of them could be detailed in the grammar teaching in classroom.
Some feedbacks from the teacher

- Reasonable critical evaluation, though with possible gaps
- Evidence of linking and integration of reading into text, though some problems.
- Overall grade -- Credit

Student’s account of the production of the text

- I’m afraid of being punished for plagiarism, so I always try to put all the possible in-text citations there.
- I’m writing the paper while reading. Usually I put all the sources on the table while I’m writing on my computer, and write down what I think it’s important and relevant from the reading.
- Time constraint is an important issue when we are writing the papers. Usually we have to write three or even four papers at the same time during some period of semester.
### Intertextual analysis

- **Intertextual representation**
  - indirect quotation, paraphrasing
- **Source type**
  - attributed, identified, authoritative source
- **Source function**
  - beliefs, ideas, issues circulated rather than as evidence or background information
- **Endorsement**
  - non-endorsement (responsibility delegated)

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### Summary

- To unpack the ways of students’ employment of outside sources, to some extent, could demystify their academic writing practices for the learners and teachers.
- It could be a cognitive, linguistic, mental and even physical struggle to understand and to practice the complexity and uncertainty in academic writing. It could be a ‘cognitive overload’ (Paton, 2005) for most of ESL students.
- “The sense of coherence in academic enculturation and practice is constructed from fragments of nonlinear, sometimes contradictory and incompletely perceived experiences rather than developed through pursuit of unambiguous goals” (Casanave, 2002, p.279).